



HIGHLAND WARRIORS SERIES

A YULETIDE PROMISE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUE-ELLEN
WELFONDER

A Yuletide Promise

Highland Warriors Holiday Novella

Sue-Ellen Welfonder

USA Today Bestselling Author



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Blurb

A Yuletide Promise

'Tis the season for happily-ever-afters...

Lady Alanna Grant might be the most cursed lass in northern Scotland, but she still believes in wonders – until her Christmas is ruined by Callum MacCulloch, a dark-hearted pirate who kidnaps her from right before her castle's holly-draped hearth. A ruse pressed upon Callum by highest orders in the land, the rescue hurtling them on an unexpected path and proving a thousand-year Yuletide legend, the promise of truest love.

Praise for A Yuletide Promise

“Adventure, fantasy, and magic ... A Yuletide Promise of legendary love. .. Entices readers to curl up in their favorite spot as they are whisked away to a long ago time of enchantment.” ~ InD'tale Magazine

“If you love animals, magic and medieval Scotland you will love this story. Welfonder's characters come to life before your eyes and you are living their story. Read the rest of Sue-Ellen's books - you will be hooked just like me.” ~ Amazon

“Every time I sit down with a story from Sue-Ellen, I feel like I've pulled up a chair by a cozy fire to listen to a bard relate a tale from olde. .. With this story I found myself quickly thinking '*man oh man at these burly Highland warriors!*' I especially loved meeting up with Grim, my favorite from her books.” ~ Bookworm to Bookworm Reviews

“Many twists and turns ... a unique story. When the hero and heroine realize they are made for each other, it's magic. I've read many stories by this author and she is another favorite of mine. She has this character with red shoes called Devorgilla of Doon who has appeared in other stories and she brings such antics that I know we are in for a treat!” ~ Amazon

“A clever, gripping storyline based on honour, love and bravery. Not forgetting a nod to the much loved Devorgilla for her wonderful meddlings!” ~ Amazon UK

“Confirms this is a wonderful time of year to find love and hope!”
~ Goodreads

“I love this story. Devorgilla is one of my favorite characters of all time. I love how she helps the couple find each other. (I need a Devorgilla in my life!!) Sue-Ellen has a talent for making the reader feel as though they are in Scotland. The love of family and friends and pets come through in the story. The best thing I can say is go look up all of Sue-Ellen’s books, they are awesome!! Look for Devorgilla and her plaid shoestrings!!” ~ Amazon

Praise for Sue-Ellen Welfonder

“With each book Welfonder reinforces her well-deserved reputation as one of the finest writers of Scottish romance.” ~ RT Book Reviews

“Welfonder takes the reader away from the mundane and gives her an emotional journey that floods the senses and makes the heart pound.” ~ Long and Short Reviews

“Welfonder weaves ancient histories, legends, and fascinating lore into sensual Highlander romance.” ~ Writers and Readers

“Welfonder’s love of Scotland shines on every page.” ~ Romantic Times

“Welfonder writes great tales of passion and adventure.” ~ Romance Reviews Magazine

“Welfonder knows all the best ingredients for the perfect Highland romance.” ~ A Romance Review

“Sue-Ellen Welfonder books are like good friends...you’ll laugh with them, cry with them, dream with them and keep them with you always!” ~ Amazon

Mini Excerpt

A Hero's Heart...

“Take care of the lass,” Grim urged him, serious again.

And then he was gone, disappearing into the slanting snow and mist, all that remained of him, the clacking of his beard rings and the rustling of his bearskin cloak.

Callum pulled a hand down over his own beard, his mind once more on Lady Alanna Grant.

He felt a powerful urge to race back to her.

A desire that had little to do with her troubles and – the gods help him – everything to do with his heart.

He just didn't know why.

Dedication

For two beautiful cedar trees felled on my watch. One bore a natural heart high on its trunk, and they stood close together. Their grace comforted and awed me, their end broke my heart. I cried through the long hours it took to bring them down and when silence let me know they were gone, my tears were joined by inspiration. In their loss, the idea for this story was born. A Yuletide Promise is my promise to them that they are not forgotten.

Acknowledgment

As with every stroke of my pen, love and thanks to my very handsome husband, Manfred, who has made me a heroine in my own life for more decades than I care to admit. I wish I had as much faith in myself. As well, in loving memory of my beloved Jack Russell terrier, Em. Little man, do you know how much I miss you? Also a nod to my darling gray tabby cat, Snuggles. Found as a feral kitten, he was the true rescuer - and he still is, warming my desk chair daily, filling my days with so much love and joy.

A Personal Note to Readers

Please note this is a work of fiction and not meant to reflect cold, hard reality. The following pages contain elements of fantasy such as myth and legend, curses, magic, enchanted trees, ghosts, etc. A suspension of belief is therefore required. As this is a novella, the door to the bedroom isn't as wide as in my longer novels. There is a spark of heat, just not explicit. As a romance novel written by me, it does not contain the F-word or other profanity. It does include hot Highlanders and Vikings, a mysterious old woman who wears red plaid shoelaces, and a few places in Scotland that are dear to me. Some of those places are written as enchanted, locations where unusual things can happen. That's because I perceive them so. Above all, this story is filled with love for Scotland's wild and rugged North, all things Yule, and a very special aged cat (Goodie) who inspired Gubbie in this story. The real world won't be found in this book's pages, only a reflection of how I wish the world could be. I hope you'll enjoy spending time there.

*Wishing you Highland magic,
Sue-Ellen Welfonder
(aka Allie Mackay)*

Quote

*“A thousand years are nothing to a heart that loves true.” ~ Torrad the
Fearless, Viking warlord*

The Yuletide Lovers

Long ago, in a time now lost, Vikings celebrated winter with bonfires, carouse, and rivers of mead. Yule was known to hold great magic. Powers that strengthened the farther north a reveler journeyed, the deeper into lands of cold gray seas, glacial rivers, and mountains of ice. A place where the night sky caught fire as Norse gods rollicked across the heavens, making merry with the same gusto as their mortal counterparts, sea-raiders who raised drinking horns and ravished women as gladly as they swung their great two-handed war axes.

Vikings were big, bold men, their thirst for battle and carnal delights as mythic as their sagas.

Their seed spread far and wide, the fever in their hot, red blood clashing, then meshing with the likewise fiery spirit of the Highlander. Plaid-draped warriors just as daring, but tempered by a romantic soul. These men of hill and glen possessed a fierce sense of honor, respected the old ways, and believed in magic. As did Northmen, each arm-ringed one of them eager to tip back his head at Midwinter and roar, '*Hail, Thor and Odin!*' while across the wintry seas, the Highland Scot bowed to his Celtic ancestors, his sentimental heart spinning dreams.

Moons and seasons passed, then centuries, and the lines between the pagan North and Celtic Scotland blurred, brittle air and sharp wind now mellowed by the glow of smoldering peat, the Norsemen's oft-times harsh and brutal sagas softened by the Highlander's need for words that stir the soul.

And so no one should be surprised that Scottish legend tells of two enchanted trees that grace the heart of a secret glen. A corner of the land so hallowed, no one knows its true name or location.

The mystery is part of the allure.

If bards sing of the *Yuletide Lovers*, eyes shine and pulses quicken.

For Highlanders, that's enough.

Those who delve deeper, learn that it's believed the trees are Scots pines and their powerful magic is a blend of everything sacred

to Celts and the Norse, a mix made all the more potent by the influences of Yule, a time when the trees are said to sparkle, turning silver beneath the light of cold, winter stars.

Few have seen this wonder, but those who have tell that the trees have grown together. Roots and branches forever entwined, the trunks close but not touching.

Men who believe the tales know why...

For once there were star-crossed lovers who eloped at Yuletide only to be caught on that spot. The man fell to his enemy's spear which passed through him to pierce his bride, binding them by the spear-length through their hearts. Their blood drenched the ground, turning the snow red. But come spring, two trees sprouted there and grew beautiful and tall, embracing ever more as years and centuries passed.

Then lightning struck one of the trees, a tragedy that caused the other to wither and die. Nothing would grow there again, except every summer, a heart-shaped ring of forget-me-nots.

No one touched the almost-fossilized trees, leaving them where they'd fallen. This was done in respect and to honor the long-ago lovers who perished there.

Of course, legends and stories swirled. The most popular claimed that the young man was Torrad the Fearless, a promising Norse warlord, while his sweetheart, known only as Kadlin, was believed to have been the favorite daughter of one of Norway's most silver-tongued poets.

As a much-loved storyteller, the girl's father enjoyed the favor of many great men. Of a calculating nature, he held ambitions of Kadlin wedding a high-ranking noble. But hearts choose their own path, and Kadlin loved Torrad the Fearless, even though he had but a small farm and spent much of his time at sea, raiding and warring, his victories mostly fattening other men's purses.

Kadlin didn't care, but Torrad the Fearless did.

He wanted better for her.

To that end, he journeyed far, even fighting for Scottish chieftains and English lords, and sometimes Irish kinglets – anything to earn enough coin to improve his status and gain Kadlin's hand, his hard-won riches sure to impress her greed-driven sire.

Sadly, fate wasn't kind to the bold, young Viking.

Another, more prosperous warlord cast his eye on Kadlin. This

man was Bork the Blood-ax. Cunning and ruthless, he used Torrad's absence to befriend Kadlin's father. He also lured away many of Torrad's men, killing any who remained loyal. His dark deeds done, Bork convinced a mighty Norse noble to seize Torrad's land and gift it to him. The farm, and a promise that Kadlin would be forced to dwell there, as his wife.

Of course, no one can say if such a tale is true.

But on long, cold and dark nights in torch-lit great halls across the wintry Highlands, talented bards say it is so. They stand before blazing hearth fires or stroll past festively bedecked tables, pitching their deep, carrying voices to recall Torrad's fury and how he made his ladylove a Yuletide promise, vowing that no power on earth would part them.

Sadly, a flash of silver, a boon dangled, a debt excused, and enough souls forget their honor. That Torrad knew, and so he went to Kadlin in secret and the two planned their escape – a journey across harsh winter seas to England, where Torrad would enlist the aid of a powerful English earl he'd once fought for, and who owed him more than a few favors, besides.

With this great man's help, Torrad and Kadlin would resettle in England, living as man and wife, raising their children on new, if foreign ground. They'd grow old and fat together, happy and in love for all their granted days.

The bards pause then, perhaps downing a cup of ale before they proceed, warning all present to be wary of plans. For the gods are fickle and man cannot outrun destiny.

Even so, the lovers meant to try.

They trusted the magic of Yule would aid them, for with Midwinter's Eve celebrations looming, even the most foul-spirited souls would be too occupied with feasting and drinking to note the departure of two souls sailing away into the darkness of a deep winter night, not even a sliver of moon to shine down on them.

Unfortunately...

Fate remained unkind.

The sweethearts were observed fleeing Norway. Bork the Blood-ax was informed, and the pair were pursued. The gods hammered them as well, sending storms to break over them, raising the seas, and causing the tides to hurl Torrad's fine serpent-headed ship onto the jagged rocks somewhere beneath the sheer, black-glowering cliffs of northern Scotland.

A magic-filled realm even in those brutal times, thick fog rose to cloak the shattered remains of Torrad's ship. And just when the pair feared they'd landed in a place of no escape, the mist parted to reveal a track zigzagging up the cliff.

This, the lovers climbed, their will to live and marry strengthening their spirit and limbs. They reached the high moors at the top of the headland with ease, and ran. They did not look back, only hurtled onward, running without pause until, at last, they found themselves in a long, deep-sided glen.

An empty place, filled with rock, cold, and rushing wind. Here, they would rest, and then – the gods willing – they'd journey south, traveling as long as they needed to reach the English earl Torrad was sure would welcome them.

It wasn't meant to be.

Bork the Blood-ax found them before they even left the glen, his glee in doing so perhaps making him careless when he aimed his spear. He'd meant to fell Torrad, never Kadlin with him. But his spear struck hard and fast, slaying them both so that Kadlin breathed her last in the same heartbeat as her beloved.

Passing centuries erased the rest, or more likely, Bork the Blood-ax, as a powerful but cruel warlord, didn't hold the same romantic appeal to later talespinners as two tragic lovers?

Either way, every winter, bards embellished what they did know, and as time passed, folk came to believe that if a woman found a heart-shaped piece of the trees now called the *Yuletide Lovers* and added it to the Yule log's blaze, she'd meet her true love before Yuletide's end.

Of course, finding the fallen trees is tricky. Many hills and glens claim them. Few seekers, if any, ever come close to locating the real place.

Then, as yet another Midwinter's Eve draws near, one desperate lass dares, determined to defy the odds. But great care is required of her, for if wood from the wrong tree is taken, she will remain unmarried all her days. Or worse, she and her newfound sweetheart will relive the tragedy of the past.

Of course, true love is powerful magic and miracles do happen at Yuletide...

Chapter 1

Isle of Skerray

The North Sea, Winter 1399

Callum MacCulloch didn't have anything against Yule.

He just wasn't in the mood.

Leastways not for the merrymaking awaiting him on the far side of Skerray village, beside a great and blazing fire. Ale would flow there, the air reeking of burning driftwood, brine, roasting fish, the stale perfume of joy-women brought over from Aberdeen's dockside taverns, and just enough peat to remind the Skerraymen that mainland Scotland was out there somewhere, beyond the chill wind and across the cold, night-darkened sea.

He glanced that way now, shuddering. For reasons as deep as the marrow of his bones, he didn't set foot gladly on that distant coast. What he would enjoy was a good night's sleep on his pallet in Skerray's longhouse, a low-slung, thick-walled remnant of the island's Viking past – an unfortunate connection that never failed to remind him of his equally strong ties to the rockbound shore of northern Scotland where sheer, black cliffs supported the ruined shell of his ancestral home, Draugar Hall.

"Bluidy, ghost-ridden pile o' rubble," he snarled, the ruin's image rearing up in his memory, the roofless, crumbling walls glaring at him, accusatory as ever.

As if he bore the weight of Draugar's fall.

A centuries-old tragedy so dusty its tellings were less than the faintest echoes.

So why couldn't he forget?

Because he wouldn't have any peace until the last of his g-g-g-great grandfather's treasure hoard had been hauled away from the cave set deep into the cliffs beneath Draugar's crumbling walls. He'd already found and retrieved a small portion, enough to pay a few longstanding debts. What remained, if anything, would restore his family's honor and – he hoped – return his ancestral seat to its

erstwhile glory. At the least, he'd do enough to give the old stones some dignity.

If a few ghosts could then find peace, all the better.

If not...

He frowned, pulled a hand down over his beard. He wouldn't consider failure. Giving up had brought the downfall of those who'd gone before him and he'd not repeat their mistakes. He'd studied each one and learned from them. If his goals required a bit more toil, he had the backbone and brawn to succeed.

And so he put back his shoulders, quickened his pace down a road edged on one side by low stone cottages and racks of fishing nets, a sandy beach on the other, a handful of tide pools glinting in the moonlight. He scarce noticed, the phantom of Draugar Hall spoiling the night's beauty.

"Freyja's bosom!" came a clear, feminine voice. "Such a dark face at Yule?"

"Perhaps you should look again?" Callum turned, flashed a smile as Ula, Skerray's sole female occupant, caught up to him, her sea-green eyes shining. Mistress of Blackie Bain, Pirate King of the Skerries, she was – as Blackie loved to say – more than enough woman to make up for the lack of others.

"Perhaps you do not fool me." She laughed, shifted the basket of mistletoe clutched at her hip.

"I would no' even try."

"You just did."

"Ah, well." He raised his hands, palms outward. "I should've known better."

"True enough," Ula agreed, her tone husky, everything about her full of warmth and vigor.

Callum lowered his hands, sure she could charm anyone. Indeed, many whispered that she, not Blackie, ran the windswept cluster of seafarer-populated islets, many little more than a jagged spit of foam-washed rock.

"You'll be joining us at the fire?" She lifted a brow, something in her eyes making him want to run a finger beneath the neck opening of his tunic.

"I was heading to the longhouse."

"You were, aye," she declared. "And now you're heading to the shore. 'Tis a night of mischief and mayhem, dancing round the fire, and kisses." She lifted a bit of mistletoe from her basket, twirled it

in the air. "More, as the night lengthens."

"That I know."

Ula smiled and took a swat at him with the mistletoe. "'Tis Yule."

"Aye, and Blackie's been celebrating every e'en since the nights started drawing in again." Callum took the mistletoe from her hand, dropped it back in her basket. "Midwinter is a good fortnight away, mayhap longer. With all the mayhem and merriment, a man loses track of days."

"It's tradition." Ula shrugged. "Blackie keeps the ways of our Norse ancestors."

"As do I."

"Then why seek your pallet? Alone?" She tilted her head, her fiery-red curls tossed by the wind. "Now is the time to honor the returning sun, plant seeds that will bloom in spring. You're too young and bonnie to have lost the heat in your blood."

"My mind was elsewhere, lady," Callum addressed her as only he did, much to her delight, as always.

"Skerry is no place for a lady," she said, her broad smile leaving no doubt that suited her fine.

In truth, Callum was sure, the Skerries were lucky to have her, lady or no.

Lusty, quick to laugh, and loyal to the bone, she had a heart as generous as her curves, and she knew how to use her wiles to persuade any man to do her bidding. A wild-haired, hot-blooded vixen, she'd held Blackie in her thrall ever since he'd plucked her out of a Dublin alehouse.

"Aye, well..." Callum caught her wrist, dropped a kiss on her knuckles. "Then Queen of the Skerries," he said, releasing her hand. "You cannae argue with the truth of that."

She beamed. "And you are a gallant – too much so for the rough lot here on these isles."

"Whate'er I am, I'll no' be at the revels. My pallet calls and-"

"Ah, but there's Yuletide magic in the air tonight," she cut him off, stepping round to block his escape when he turned toward a path between two stone cottages, small ones roofed with thatch. "There's a lady-"

"Did you no' just say this is nae place for a lady?"

"Did I say she was here?"

"Nae, and it scarce matters."

“But it does.” She set down her basket of mistletoe, gripped his arm when he again tried to enter the path, a dark and muddled track, but the swiftest route to the longhouse.

Callum was tempted to break free and stride on down the path, but his fool nape was prickling. So, for good or ill, he stayed. “What is this about?”

“I see a lady for you,” Ula said, sounding much too serious. “Pale gold hair like a cascade of moonlight, eyes the blue of a deep northern sea. Tall, well-made, and with a proud look to her, as I’d imagine a Valkyrie. I dreamed of her, saw you running toward her, then catching her in your arms and whirling her round and round.”

“That’s some dream.”

“It was.” Ula held his gaze, her fabled charm replaced by earnestness. “I get such dreams now and then. I thought you knew?”

He did. “Everyone in the Skerries kens that, lassie,” he admitted, grudgingly.

Still, this night he chose to ignore her penchant for seeing things in dreams.

How often such glimpses proved true.

The last thing he needed – *or wanted* – was to be saddled with a gentle-born female, bonnie or otherwise. He had plans. Duties and obligations that didn’t have a sliver of wriggle room for a fussy highborn lass making his days a trial and keeping him from his goals, her blue blood too thin to even warm him on a cold winter’s night, something every Highlander appreciated in a bedmate, and for sure in a wife.

And where did *that* come from?

Ula hadn’t said she saw him marry the woman.

Praise the gods.

“Do you know where this lady is?” Callum’s tongue formed the question before he could clamp his jaw.

He did frown.

Ula’s brow also pleaded. “Nae, I only saw what I told you,” she said, her words taking a weight off his heart. “But,” she added as quickly, “as soon as I wakened, I knew how she is called.”

“Her name?”

“Nae, who she is,” Ula said, making no sense. “She is the maid with a heart of stone.”

“A maid with a stony heart doesn’t sound all that appealing.”

Callum adjusted his plaid against the cold night wind – hopefully the reason a chill just sped down his spine. “I’ve no time for women, besides. For sure, no’ to whirl them about, as well you know. Draugar Hall-”

“... has stood for centuries.” She leaned in then, her tone sending another shiver through him. “It’ll not mind waiting a wee bit longer. Its stones will glow on its cliff again soon enough. Indeed...” She straightened, picked up her basket. “Could be candles already light the windows? Yuletide candles, perhaps?”

“Even better, a Yule log.” She paused, a faraway look in her eyes. “Cheery red flames curling round a nice, fat log, a burst of sparks now and then? Coziness to turn back years, giving hope and joy to old, weather-worn walls, warmth to stir ancient longings so powerful the need stops your heart.”

“Ancient longings? When did you become a talespinner, my lady?” Callum glanced at the sea where a high tide frothed the night-blackened waves. Wind did the rest, sending moon-kissed sea spray pluming in the air. “Any fire lit in Draugar’s poor shell of a tower would be snuffed before a fish could sneeze.”

Ula laughed, her usual merry self again. “Since when do fish sneeze?”

“They don’t. That’s the point.”

“Perhaps we just don’t hear them?” She hooked her arm through his, drew him away from the darkened cottages. “Now stop being so thrawn and come with me to the revels. We have guests and one of them wishes to speak with you.”

“Your stone-hearted maid?”

“Nae, a man.” Ula quickened her steps, pulling him ever closer to the blazing fire at the sea’s edge. “A great, big-bearded Highlander, a seasoned warrior by the look of him. Strong, hard face and piercing gaze. I’d have brought him with me to find you, but some of Blackie’s hounds ran over to him and he dropped to his knees and-”

“He’s feeding them twists of dried beef from a pouch at his sword belt?” Callum finished for her, his heart sinking for the visitor could only be his distant cousin Grim Mackintosh of Nought territory in the Western Highlands. Nae, not quite correct, for in recent years Grim served as captain of the guards at a neighboring stronghold, Duncreag Castle, where he aided Archie MacNab, a cantankerous old laird who now looked on Grim as a son.

Unfortunately, Grim had other duties as well.

Ones Callum preferred to ignore.

And as they rarely met, save when those other obligations raised a demanding head, he could only hope he erred and the guest sought him for a different reason. Perhaps someone needing an extra crewman or sword arm, tasks he'd engage in gladly, always eager to earn a bit of extra coin.

Too bad his gut said otherwise.

Grim was here in the Skerries and not to drink mead and make merry.

Callum's cousin only went where the tip of his well-sharpened sword led him – or, better said, the even deadlier edge of his huge Viking war ax.

He also loved animals.

And so Callum stood in the middle of the empty, winter-hardened road and lifted a hand to grip the Thor's hammer amulet at his neck. He also sent a quick prayer to the gods. He wasn't of a mind to join Grim on some wild and bothersome adventure.

"Ula..." He drew a long breath, expelled it quickly. "The man with Blackie's dogs - is he a big, ugly brute? A Highland warrior in mail, a Thor's hammer at his neck, a Viking war ax strapped across his back? Does he..." – he paused, clenched his fists before voicing the telling words – "Are his eyes the gray of smoke? Do silver rings glint in his beard?"

"Aye, that's him!" Ula nodded, beaming. "The Aberdeen lassies are falling over themselves, each one trying to land him first."

"They'll no' have any luck," Callum told her. "He ne'er even looks at any woman save his Irish wife, Breena."

"Then you do know him?"

"Aye."

"Well?" Ula poked him. "Who is he?"

"My cousin."

"Ah, I should have known." Ula stepped back, let her gaze flicker over him. "Now I see it."

Callum raised his brows. "If you do, you're looking back o'er centuries. We are cousins many times removed. My g-g-g-great aunt married a Nought Mackintosh. Her name was Astrid, which I suspect drew my g-g-g-great uncle's attention. Mackintoshes cling to their Norse ancestry."

Ula laughed. "And you don't?"

“Aye, well...” Callum kicked a pebble in the road. “There’s less than a fine line between a Highlander and a Viking. All know it.”

“Still, there’s a strong resemblance between you and this Grim,” Ula persisted. “You’re both big, burly men with strong faces some might call hard or fierce. Dark hair, though he’s tied his back with a length of leather. You’ve each ringed your arms with silver bands, though your cousin also has the warrior rings braided into his beard.

“But your eyes...” She paused, angling her head as she peered at him. “They aren’t-”

“My eyes are green. And you’ve just described Blackie and nigh every man in the Skerries.” Callum touched his sword’s hilt, his superstitious Celtic side warning that a hundred lookalike souls could race ashore at Skerray and – still – he and Grim Mackintosh would stand out as marked by fate.

Grim to fight like a Berserker, weep over an injured animal, aid feeble old chieftains, and worship his woman, while he, as last heir to a luckless family, hurtled through life, always chasing the next horizon, seeking a dream he couldn’t reach.

Then, much to his amazement, he found he *had* reached the bonfire.

Though he’d have sworn he and Ula hadn’t budged, they somehow now stood at the road’s end, Skerray’s largest beach spreading before them, the sand reddened by the fire’s leaping flames. Shouts, laughter, and song filled the cold night air, as did the crackling of burning driftwood, the ever-present pounding of the surf. Pipes blared, the rousing skirls and wild dancing joined by the lusty cries of lovers deep in the throes of carnal bliss.

Wondering what midwinter madness saw him here rather than in the longhouse, on his pallet and beneath a few thick plaids and a furred blanket, Callum kept his gaze off the many bowers of pine boughs, holly, and mistletoe scattered up and down Skerray’s broad, crescent-shaped beach. It was there the tugging would be going on and he wasn’t of a mind to see even one bared bosom – for sure not the full-naked writhing of an Aberdeen tavern wench.

“The Skerry men honor the gods.” Ula flashed him a look, her eyes alight with a blend of amusement and knowing. “They will sleep well this night.”

“The gods?”

Ula laughed. “The men.”

“No doubt,” Callum agreed, leaping aside as a cloud of sparks whirled past, the spark-shower followed by several serving lads running about with ale jugs, as much of the potent brew sloshing onto the sand as revelers tipped down their throats.

At the shoreline, there where the surf gleamed white, a group of men began striking sword blades against shields and the rhythmic beat rolled along the beach and out across the waves, the echoes taking all present back to distant times, then when the magic of these dark winter nights was potent indeed, and never doubted.

But all that faded in a blink, leaving only the telltale barks of Blackie’s hounds – *happy* barks, and coming closer.

Grim neared.

And Callum felt each of his footsteps as if they seared his soul.

Chapter 2

“Cousin!” The big man strode forward, finely dressed as always, his beard-and-arm rings shining. His mailed shirt gleamed as bright and a smile split his face as he gripped Callum’s arms, wholly at ease with the pack of yapping dogs racing around him. “Guid Yule!” he said, lifting his voice above the ruckus. “Hail, Thor and Odin!”

“And Njord,” Callum added his own favorite, the god who ruled the winds and the sea, aiding seafarers, bringing them wealth – or so his ancestors claimed. “Merry Yuletide.”

“Where have the months gone?” Grim shook his head, his beard rings clacking. “It’s been too long.”

Not long enough, Callum almost returned, noting his cousin’s finery. The huge fur cloak thrown back over his powerful shoulders, his tall leather boots, war-lord trappings made all the more imposing by his silver-studded sword belt and long-handled war ax, something Blackie would never allow on Skerray lest worn on Grim’s back.

The Pirate King trusted and admired Grim.

So did Callum, though he wasn’t wont to admit it.

He did step back when Grim released him, hooked his thumbs in his sword belt, secretly glad he stood just as tall and fearsome as his cousin, both men generally ranging heads and shoulders above other men in any given crowd. Unfortunately, before he could enjoy that small victory, Ula slipped away.

Something she wouldn’t have done without a reason.

A truth that kept him from smiling.

“So...” He looked on as Grim bent to pet the dogs sniffing his boots. “You’re no’ here to guzzle mead on a freezing night, feed dried beef twists to someone else’s hounds while your own, and your fair lady wife, bemoan your absence.

“I ken you better.” Callum did. “What brings you to the Skerries?”

“You, of course.”

Callum almost laughed. “At least you’re honest.”

“Always.”

"Then tell me what I dinnae know." Callum strode away from the bonfire, farther down the sandy beach, knowing his cousin would follow. "And I'll tell you," he went on the instant Grim paced alongside him, "I'm no' taking off for Stirling again. The King and his clan of Stewart madmen can wriggle out of their own problems this time. I've enough to-"

"The matter concerns a lady." Grim stepped around before him, his great bulk limned by moonlight. "She's in dire need, and great peril. Mortal danger."

"My regrets." Callum ignored the way his chest tightened, the fiery stitch in his side, there one moment, gone the next. "I'm no' the man to aid damsels in distress. I'm a pirate and treasure seeker, no' a gallant knight on a white charger."

"I ken exactly who and what you are," Grim reminded him.

"So do I." Callum frowned. "Heir to a hall of ghosts. A place filled with nothing but roosting seabirds and cold, dank air."

"Draugar Hall..." Callum strode a few paces, then whirled back around. "Even the name means home of phantoms."

"Tis yours all the same," Grim said, not surprisingly, right before him. "Nae man can outrun his fate."

"Why do you think I do what I do? And..." Callum paused, narrowed his eyes. "How can you move about so quietly? Big and ugly as you are?"

"Certain training sits in the bones." Grim didn't smile. "This isn't a family visit. I was sent here because you can aid this poor lassie. You and no other, for she must be escorted from her home and kept safe until certain souls have seen to those who would harm her."

Callum nodded, only too aware his cousin meant bold, oath-sworn men who served the Scottish Crown, executing the most urgent and secretive biddings.

"She is to be brought to Skerray?" Callum guessed.

"So it is desired."

"Why not your own Nought, or Archie's Duncreag? Both are secure strongholds."

Grim shook his head, his damnable beard rings clacking again. "They are distant. Such a long journey is too great a risk."

"What does the lady think of this?"

"She doesn't know," Grim said, looking fine with that.

Callum frowned again. "I dinnae like this."

"Alerting her could see her speak of the plan to the wrong

person.” Grim fell silent as a drunken Skerrayman and one of the Aberdeen harbor lasses lurched past them, on their way to the soft grasses high on the dunes. “She daren’t suspect what’s happening,” he finished when the couple were far enough away. “Only so can we be sure of keeping her safe.”

“You want her kidnapped.” Callum felt his nape catch fire. “I’ll no’ do that.”

“You dinnae have a choice.” Grim looked out at the choppy sea, then back to him. “King’s orders.”

“Any Skerrayman can fetch her,” Callum argued. “I’m no’ good with ladies.”

“The maid is Lady Alanna Grant,” Grim told him, ignoring his objections. “She is the last of her line, a lass some say is cursed for many in her family, or around her, meet an untimely end.”

Callum’s brows shot up. “Are you wanting rid of me?”

“What I want is to return home to my wife,” Grim said, his fierce face softening for a beat. “But I am a man of honor, and will ne’er look away from a woman in need.”

“Humph.” Callum wished he hadn’t asked.

Feeling guilt he was sure he didn’t deserve, he glanced down the beach toward Blackie’s bonfire, the bright red flames staining the sky. Shouts and laughter came on the wind, the joyous carouse seeming as distant as the moon. He should’ve gone to the revels, knocked back enough mead to be snoring loudly about now, oblivious to his cousin’s arrival – and demands.

Instead...

He swallowed, fought a burgeoning sense of kinship with Lady Alanna Grant even as Grim’s tale repelled him.

He knew something of cursed families – leastwise luckless ones.

“Tell me more,” he said, ready to listen if nothing else.

“The Stewarts believe you above all others can fetch the maid,” Grim explained. “Her home is Seacliffe Castle, built on lands that-”

“...were once held by my family,” Callum cut in, realization dawning. “Treacherous headlands and wilder seas, and your Stirling friends ken I’ve tracked every inch of that devil-cursed ground.”

“So it is.”

“I dinnae like this.” Callum clenched his fists, felt his nails dig into the flesh of his palms. “’Tis Yuletide, you bastard,” he played his last objection, leaving out that – until now – he hadn’t cared at all about merrymaking or whate’er.

This year, anyways.

“I have a galley moored round thon cliffs.” Grim spoke as if all was agreed. “My men and I will see you to Seacliffe in a day or so, after all plans have been laid. The ship is packed with most everything you’ll need. Stewarts onshore will supply the rest. Once you have Lady Alanna, we’ll bring you back here.”

“A fine lady on Skerray,” Callum grumbled. “She’ll be bawling in an hour.”

“Or not.” Grim actually smiled. “I hear she is a braw lassie. She willnae be a burden.”

“And then?”

“That is for the gods to decide,” Grim said, his gaze on the sea.

Callum grunted, not trusting himself to speak.

He might ask his cousin if Lady Alanna was known as the maid with a stony heart.

Chapter 3

Seacliffe Castle

Northern Scotland, a few nights later...

The Yuletide Lovers were real, their hearts and souls as one.

And no power on earth would part them.

Lady Alanna Grant kept the words in her heart, imagining the boundless love that inspired them as she tipped Yuletide ale into the cold, moon-glazed sea so far beneath the windows of her tower bedchamber.

No power on earth would part them...

She looked out across the choppy water, the sentiment piercing her heart. She'd heard it often enough, and her reaction was always the same. A rush of feeling: pain, hope, then a powerful yearning that faded as quickly as it'd seized her. She doubted that would ever change. Every bard in the land ended his tale of the ill-fated lovers with those words.

Over the years, she'd added a few of her own...

"Torrad the Fearless and Kadlin, may the gods and magic of Yule bless you these days and evermore," she spoke the blessing aloud, letting the night wind carry her well-wishes to wherever the long-lost lovers dwelled.

That done, she tossed crumbled bits of Yule cakes onto the glassy waves, hoping as she did each year, that – at last - she might find the *Yuletide Lovers*, the two felled trees said to be the pair's oh-so-romantic resting place.

The quest was a tradition.

And this year more than her heart was at stake.

Unless she was losing her mind, she was no longer simply cursed – her very life was now in danger.

Sure of it, she drew a long breath, refusing to despair. Fear wouldn't aid her. Though brave as she might be, she couldn't erase the shock of an arrow thwacking into the heather only a pace away from where she'd strode along the high moors just the day before.

Poachers, most had said, the soul's aim gone wrong when he spied the lady of the castle appear out of the morning mist.

She knew better.

She'd also nearly plunged to her death a sennight earlier when a rope fastened alongside the steep cliff-stair gave way in her hand. Iron pins that had held the rope in place for years, tumbled into the sea, the rope trailing behind.

Her breath caught as the memory rose inside her, but she tamped it down.

She was a Seacliffe Grant and she'd stand tall against her foes.

She just wished she knew who they were.



* * *

"I heard you mumbling, lassie." Her aunt Nettie joined her, plunked a sack of dried and silvered seaweed on a bench beside the window. A small, slight woman with a whirr of iron-gray hair and light blue eyes, she was the sister of Alanna's late mother. "'Tis wasting your breath, you are. Thon lovers are a bard's tale, nothing more. All know it and so do you, I'm thinking."

"I don't know one way or the other." Alanna took a clump of seaweed and draped it across branches of red-berried rowan already fastened to the top of the arched window. She selected more seaweed – another Seacliffe holiday tradition, the sea tangle gathered at ebb tide and coupled with the sacred rowan, believed to ward off evil. Hoping so, she did the same with this batch, arranging the seaweed to spill down both sides of the window.

Satisfied, she dusted her hands and turned to her aunt. "Knowing isn't necessary. I feel the truth here." She pressed a hand to her breast, ignored how her heart still beat way too fast. "Even if Torrad and Kadlin only existed in the fancy of some long-ago talespinner's heart, all the many souls who have shed tears for

them, have surely given them life.

“At the least, in the Otherworld.” Alanna believed it with the depth of her soul. “Yule does the rest, the magic of the ancients.”

“Pah!” Aunt Nettie plucked a curl of seaweed off Alanna’s sleeve, dropped it on a red-glowing brazier. “The ancients are as gone as thon bit of tangle ash,” she said, glancing at what remained of the seaweed curl. “Magic has ne’er helped the Grants and it willnae do so this Yule either – no matter how many cups of ale and crumbled bannocks you cast into the sea.”

“The idea is to honor the old ways.” Alanna turned back to the window, braced her hands of the cold, gritty stone of its ledge. She understood her aunt’s rejection of suchlike. After all, she’d seen much hardship, buried many beloved souls, and she’d toiled more than anyone Alanna knew, always struggling to keep Seacliffe from falling out of Grant hands.

Alanna strove to do the same.

But she wanted more.

A strong sense of duty kept her back straight and her shoulders squared, but resolve didn’t banish the cold of long and dark winter nights. Only one thing could do that, and – dangerous as such desires might be - she wasn’t quite ready to abandon her hopes, her belief in wonder and love, the true and abiding kind that bound the *Yuletide Lovers*.

“Yule is upon us,” she said, and inhaled deeply of the chill sea air, let the crashing of the waves fill her ears, and her heart. “Those who have gone before us, every soul to ever call this place home, gathered sea tangle, rowan, and mistletoe to decorate this one tower chamber as our seafaring ancestors did.

“Even if we fill the hall below with holly, ivy, and evergreen boughs, whatever other trappings we have, here in this room, our ghosts feel welcome.” She sighed, sometimes feeling like a ghost herself, always yearning for times past, ways and customs long put aside.

“Our lost ones are at peace here,” she finished, hoping so, anyway. “They know we remember them.”

“There be no haints here, or anywhere.” Aunt Nettie jutted her chin.

“Some would disagree.”

“More would say there’s too much of your mother in you.” Her aunt asked. “Out with the fairies, she was. Always seeing and

hearing things what weren't there. Proved her downfall, didn't it? Like as not she was following a swirl of mist, thinking she was chasing a green lady or mythical fawn when she walked off into a bog, ne'er to return."

"Perhaps she was," Alanna spoke plain. She didn't add that more than a few at Seacliffe had seen green ladies, odd mists, and other inexplicable things over the years.

This was her battle.

And so she stood straighter, clasped her hands before her. "My mother was sure she saw such things."

"Aye, and where did such fool notions land her?"

"Not in a good place," Alanna admitted, reaching down to scratch the ears of the aged gray cat who appeared out of nowhere to press against her skirts, clearly wanting attention or food. "Even so, I doubt she'd change a thing about the life she had, or what she believed. She left us too soon, as did my father, but no one can say they weren't happy. Such love as they shared is a rare gift."

Aunt Nettie sniffed. "They were fools, both of them."

"Perhaps." Alanna scooped Gubbie into her arms and straightened, cuddling her now purring pet against her breast. "'Tis said love makes a soul foolish."

And so does keeping stinky old cats in your bedchamber, Aunt Nettie grumbled under her breath.

Or so Alanna suspected, her ear tilted more to Gubbie's purrs and mewls than her aunt's fussing.

Aunt Nettie didn't like cats.

"His breath smells fishy," she complained, proving it.

"He eats herring." Alanna smiled. "Salmon when we are lucky enough to get some."

"I ken what he eats." Aunt Nettie frowned at Gubbie. "Between what you give him and Cook slips to him in the kitchens, he eats better than most of us."

"For sure, it shows." She looked back to Alanna. "He's fat."

"He was a thread-thin and hungry kitten when I found him." Alanna shifted Gubbie in her arms, used to his size and weight. "He deserves to eat well."

"You're trailing fast in your mother's footsteps, lassie." Aunt Nettie leaned forward, wagged a finger. "Pampering raggedy old cats and trusting in a bard's song all in Scotland know is nothing but romantic twaddle. What's true is that a mumbled blessing for

lovers that ne'er existed is the last thing you should be doing about now, the King with his eye on this holding."

"King Robert hasn't said he wants Seacliffe," Alanna said, now stroking the back of Gubbie's neck. "He wishes this stretch of coast secure."

Aunt Nettie snorted. "Same thing."

"No, it isn't."

"Humph." Her aunt studied her, considering. "We'll have to arrange a husband for you. If not a laird, Boyd can ride to Aberdeen, find a deep-pursed merchant eager for a castle and title."

"Boyd won't be riding anywhere." Alanna shook her head, her own cares forgotten. Her cousin was huge. All brawn and muscle, he surely weighed three times more than any horse in Seacliffe's stables. She'd sooner walk the many miles to Aberdeen naked and barefoot than suffer a single one of her late father's precious and regrettably aged horses to carry such a load.

"I will think of something," she said, sure she didn't have any notion what to do.

All she did know was that this Yule she meant to find the *Lovers*.

She'd recently recalled a line from one of the bards' songs about the pair – a long ago passing-through minstrel told of 'frozen waves that hid the access to their resting place.'

To her, the memory was a sign.

Better yet, she had a guess where the 'frozen waves' might be.

A line of tumbled stones far up on the high moors behind Seacliffe, the stones appearing furled like rolling waves when viewed at a distance. Rare white heather topped them, gleaming like sea foam in certain light, such as deepest winter.

Could the fabled spot be so close? Here, on her very own doorstep? Dare she hope?

Gubbie mewled then, as if encouraging her.

Aunt Nettie left the room, muttering as she closed the door.

Alanna didn't care.

Only one thought whirled in her mind as she lowered Gubbie to the floor and began pacing...

She wanted a piece of the enchanted trees so badly.

In a day or so, Seacliffe's fisher folk, farmers, and crofters would arrive for a night of feasting and receiving of gifts. They'd take home Yule bread, mead, and sacks of oats so they could make their own Yule brose throughout the festive days. Barrels of salt herring

wouldn't fail, likewise rounds of cheese. New shoes, plaids, and bolts of cloth would also be distributed, a tradition since the first stone of Seacliffe was laid, the work done by the forebears of many of the recipients of such gifts. And once the gifting ended and merrymaking resumed, she'd slip away to seek the furred stones.

With luck, they'd again resemble a frozen, white-capped sea.

And if so...

The gods just might be with her.

Chapter 4

Seacliffe Castle

The small hours of the same night...

Something woke her.

Turning over, Alanna blinked into the darkness of her bedchamber and waited for the expected tap-tap-tap of Gubbie's paw against her shoulder. When none came, she peered across the room to where a faint glow of peat embers revealed her cat curled on his rug before the smoldering hearth fire.

The night was quiet.

Even the wind had calmed, the only sound the ever-present tossing of the sea, the night's tide slapping against rocks. The ones that edged the narrow beach beneath this tower's cliffs, and the jagged, half-submerged skerries that waited to tear out the bottom of ships that came too close to Seacliffe's shores.

Alanna frowned and pushed up on her elbows, wondering how the night could feel so ordinary, yet so odd.

She *knew* she hadn't just wakened.

She'd heard a noise.

Was Boyd making his rounds this late? His footsteps always echoed in the stair tower or caused floorboards to creak when he strode along the corridor outside her door.

And slight as Aunt Nettie was, she slipped about like the ghosts she didn't believe in.

Everyone else would be sleeping – like as not, even the doughty old souls who served as night patrol on the battlements, just another reason the King surely wished a stronger garrison for such a strategically-placed castle.

Sure her own sleep was ruined, Alanna slid from her bed, threw her night cloak about her shoulders and went to the room's row of tall, arch-topped windows. She stared out at the sea, still lit by the moon, and just as empty as earlier.

Resting her hands on the edges of the window arch, she inhaled

deeply, glad for the familiar tang of cold northern seas. She supposed she should prefer the more delicate scents of old roses, lavender, or even heather, but it was wet stone, brine, and the crispness of icy winter air that made her heart pound.

Still...

Something else stirred her. And whatever it was came from deep inside her, a tingling in the roots of her soul. Need swept her, a connection with the dark, frosty night, as if she just had to peer harder at the distant horizon.

But all she saw was a light snow falling, windblown flurries across the night-blackened water.

Did the snow waken her, silent as it was?

Winter was her time of year, though she couldn't say why.

She'd always felt more at home in rough, end of the world places and wintry weather, the colder and more raw, the better. Blankets of deep snow and howling winds gave her greater joy than if someone offered her a barrel of gold.

A Grant weakness, or so many claimed, recalling how this or that ancestor gave up power and position to cling to an ancient stronghold rich in sweeping sea views, dark, boggy moorland, and vast emptiness, but poor in coin and grace.

Aunt Nettie swore that failing was a reason the family was aye so cursed.

Alanna, in particular.

She'd inherited more Grant oddities than most. No doubt a reason something had disturbed her sleep. She heard and saw things others didn't. Even so, the noise was probably just an overlarge breaker crashing onto the shore. Whoever meant her ill, didn't seem bold enough to harm her within the castle walls.

She was safe here.

But when she leaned out to look down at the rocks, she drew a sharp breath.

Shadows moved at the far edge of the beach, just where the headland jutted out into the sea.

And not just any shadows.

Hardly trusting her eyes, she stared as moonlight flickered over the long dark shape of what looked like a Viking ship just flashing round the cliff – but she couldn't hear the oar-splashes and, even more startling, no one appeared to be working the oars.

The rowing benches were empty as was the ship, save for the

tall, fierce-looking warrior standing in the ship's bow.

Clearly a leader of men, his helmet and mail shone brighter than the stars, and his fine blue cloak billowed in the wind, giving glimpses of the long sword at his side and – she gulped – the wicked, broad-bladed ax in his hand.

Her mouth bone-dry, she leaned farther out the window, now seeing the carved bust of a woman adorning the ship's high-stemmed prow. Or so she thought until a swirl of sparkling green sea spray blew across the bow, spoiling her view.

Then everything around her stilled, the heaving sea and falling snow seeming to freeze as a shimmer of green lit the prow, illuminating not a beautiful woman of wood, but a fearsome serpent head, its jaws wide as if to shout a warning to any and all foes to flee from the wrath of the warship's master.

Alanna's eyes rounded then and she clutched a hand to her cheek, for the woman whose carved likeness she'd seen now stood wrapped in the warlord's embrace, his powerful silver-banded arms holding her tight as his words drifted across the frozen, white-capped waves...

Did I not tell you there was nothing to fear? Look ahead to the land rising to greet us. There is freedom, my love, and...

His voice faded, carried away by the racing wind, drowned out by the waves as they again smashed against the rocks.

The ship sped on as well, only not the one Alanna had seen. Now, for the briefest eye-blink, she saw a simple galley, its oar-banks manned by big men in dark cloaks, while two figures stood at the prow – a warrior in mail, his back to her, and a woman with wild, tangled hair streaming in the wind.

Then the moon slipped behind a cloud and the ship vanished, beating off into the night, the endless expanse of sea that loomed on the far side of the headland. Snow fell again, harder now, the night air much colder and lifting gooseflesh on Alanna's arms.

Chills that followed her across the room and back into her great four-postered bed, but as a Grant, she ignored them, though she did pull the covers to her chin.

And it was then, just as her thundering pulse eased and her breath steadied, that icy wind swept into the room, a wild gust that carried the warrior's final words...

No power on earth will part us.

Chapter 5

*The high moors outside Seacliffe Castle
The next evening...*

“It’s the only way.”

“Say you.” Callum turned in his saddle and tossed a dark look at the big, ring-bearded man sitting his horse a few paces away. “I’ll no’ traipse about in guiser trappings, looking the fool.”

“’Tis Yule.” A corner of Grim’s mouth hitched up. “Mischief and mayhem is expected.”

“Snatching lassies from their own fireside isn’t.” The very idea made Callum scowl even harder at his cousin. “I’m a sea-reiver, no’ a stealer of women.”

“You’re saving her, remember that. Such snatchings are common during Yuletide revels in these parts. ’Tis part of the fun. She willnae be afraid.”

“She will be when she finds out she’s heading to the Skerries.”

“Perhaps,” Grim admitted. “But by the time you bring her to the ship, you’ll have soothed her.”

“No’ if I look like some cross-grained creature from a peat bog.” Callum turned his horse a bit, leaned toward his cousin. “I say we wait till her household settles and then I’ll circle round to the castle’s seaward side, climb the cliff path, slip inside, and then carry her away when she’s too sleep-muddled to notice.

“We ken her room,” he reminded Grim. “She was at the windows when we swept round the headland.”

“Thon lass could’ve been anyone. A guest or even a servant.”

“Nae, ’twas her.” Callum was sure.

And if the moon-and-starlight hadn’t lied, she was the maid Ula described to him back on Skerray.

A possibility that jellied his knees.

“Whoe’er she was, you cannae carry her or any lass down the cliff.” Grim frowned. “Lady Alanna keeps a patrol on the battlements. They’d see you. Worse, if she squirmed, you could drop

her.”

“True enough.” Callum glanced through the freezing mist toward the stronghold, so high on its sea-lashed cliffs.

A stout gatehouse gave the only entry, with thick, battlemented walls stretching along the headland on either side, the whole seeming to rise straight up from a line of boulders, the rugged landscape as fierce and forbidding as Seacliffe’s frowning walls.

Walls that shouldn’t stand so proud when Draugar Hall was a crumbling ruin.

“So-o-o...” Callum’s entire body tightened, annoyance heating his blood. “Shall we storm the gates? Barge through the merrymakers in the lady’s bailey, invade the sanctum of her great hall?” He narrowed his eyes at Grim, tamped down the urge to spur forward and knock the great ox off his steed.

Instead, the image of the lass at the tower window flashed through his mind again and his stomach knotted. More unnerving, his heart gave an odd lurch and something told him he’d march into the yawning maul of hell to save her.

“As the King and his band of Stewarts sent you, there’s surely a plan.” *A fool one, nae doubt.* Callum kept that last to himself and tossed another look at Seacliffe, noting the glow of bonfires in the bailey. Just as telling, wind brought the sound of laughter, song, shouts, and barking dogs.

Clan Grant’s Yuletide revels were in full swing.

Callum frowned, his mood souring.

“My sorrow, I’m no’ of a mood for celebrating.” He turned back to Grim, shook his head at his cousin’s outlandish appearance. “Dinnae even suggest I don your smelly guiser gear.”

“Foolery is the best disguise. We’ll get inside the castle without causing a stir. Besides...” Grim paused, glanced down at the tattered animal skins and furs that made him look even more like a heathen beast than he already was. As if he knew and gloried in it, he lifted a hand to adjust the curling ram horns fastened to his helm. “This was no’ my idea,” he said. “The King-”

“If he wants Lady Alanna snatched from her home bad enough to fetch you from Duncreag and have me hauled away from Skerray, he’ll be even more upset if she dies of fright. That’s just another reason this is no’ a good idea.”

“She’ll be dead before the Daft Days are over if we fail.”

Callum’s gut clenched. “That isn’t good.”

“Indeed.”

“There’s more.”

“Aye.”

“Thon holding is nigh impregnable.” Callum ignored the cutting wind, the snow and sleet now blowing round them. “Seacliffe is her home, has been for centuries. She should be safe there,” he said, his mind racing. “That she clearly isn’t, tells me one thing.”

Grim said nothing, only lifted a frost-crusting brow.

“Her enemy is in there with her.” Callum felt bile rise in his throat. “Someone she trusts.”

“So it seems,” Grim agreed. “That’s why we’ll pose as the guisers everyone at her revels will expect tonight. Then” – he raised a hand, made a quick, hard fist – “we’ll have her out of there and on the *Wave-Dancer* before anyone realizes she’s not coming back.”

“Good enough, but with one small change.” Callum couldn’t believe what he was going to suggest.

Either he was about to defy a king’s order – or he’d lost his mind.

He hoped to all the gods it wasn’t the latter.

Chapter 6

"There you are, my dear, your people are enjoying the revels," came a motherly voice beside Alanna.

"So they are." She didn't turn to look at her aunt. Instead, she stepped out of the shelter of the arched entry to the great hall, her gaze on the merrymakers in the bailey. Singing and laughing, they cavorted around several bonfires that blazed bright, the flames leaping high, warming the night.

"They will be ale-headed on the morrow."

"Aye," Alanna agreed, ignoring the slight disdain in her aunt's voice. "They work hard all year and deserve tonight's feasting."

"Ah, well." Aunt Nettie edged closer, her cloak clutched tight against the wind. "'Tis a wonder they can whirl and leap around thon fires, full as their bellies are of Seacliffe beef and ale."

"They'll have more when they leave. Boyd will accompany them with carts of provender, along with baskets of Yule cakes and barrels of ale." Alanna looked out across the courtyard, her heart lifting to see her people's faces wreathed in smiles, their eyes shining. "The other gifts, likewise, as every year."

She glanced at her aunt, knew she didn't approve. "Father always said a laird is only as strong as the men who stand beside him. Mother agreed and so do I. Our hall shall remain open to them this night. Pallets and extra blankets have already been stacked in the wall niches if you haven't seen."

"I have."

Alanna bit back a sigh. Only her aunt could sour two such innocent words.

"Given the weather, Cook will have a plentiful and hearty breakfast for them in the morning." Alanna rubbed her hands against the cold. She regretted forgoing her usual midwinter visit to Seacliffe's farms, crofts, and outlying fishing huts, but all things considered, welcoming her people here and letting Boyd deliver the gifts was a wise choice.

Sure of it, she summoned a smile. "A good meal will keep them warm on their homebound journeys. Some have a long way to go."

"They be hardy folk. They dinnae need coddling."

"Perhaps not, but they deserve it."

Aunt Nettie's chin came up. "And if one o' them is behind the arrows zinging at you? What about the loose rope on the cliff-stair?"

"I trust our people."

"We need to watch your back all the same."

"All will be well," Alanna said, wishing it so. She also wished she didn't question her wits. It was bad enough to carry the Grant curse on her shoulders. Now, after seeing a ghostly Viking ship that then turned into a passing galley, she had to worry that so many cares were driving her mad.

Was it possible?

Would she someday walk off into the moors and vanish like her mother?

Or would a dirk between the ribs as she slept, get her first?

Suchlike and worse had been the fate of others in the family. And a few poor souls close to Clan Grant. She didn't know her own future, but had to consider all possibilities.

But not this night.

Not at Yule.

"There be venison pie inside." Aunt Nettie cast a sidelong look at Alanna, her soured mood forgotten. As with many slight souls, she ate more than ten men but didn't carry a speck of fat. "Beef ribs, smoked fish, and plump, roasted capons," she gushed. "Rivers of mead, thick and strong to wash it all down." She wagged a finger, a gleam in her eye. "Cook made your favorite custard pasties, too. A whole table of 'em, last I looked."

"I know." Alanna's mouth watered. She hadn't eaten all day, save a buttered bannock and a handful of sugared almonds she'd grabbed just before guests started arriving.

"Then come." Aunt Nettie gripped her arm, tugged her toward the hall's half-opened door, a welcoming wedge of golden light, cast by the hearth fire and more torch-and-candlelight than Seacliffe boasted all year. "You've been in the cold and wind too long. Your braids are coming loose and your nose is red."

"Gubbie won't mind." Alanna smiled, sure of it. "He'll be up under my bed, hiding from the ruckus. No one else will care either. Everyone here has seen me looking worse."

"Dinnae be too sure, lassie." Aunt Nettie sounded mysterious.

"Could be we'll have a guest you've yet to meet."

Alanna shot her a look. "Oh? Who, then?"

"Och, someone special." Aunt Nettie squinted, peered across the bailey, toward the gatehouse. "He'll be announced, for sure."

She turned back to Alanna, looking pleased. "'Tis the Earl of Dunwhinnie and he—" She broke off at a swell of laughter from nearby revelers. "Himself, and no other," she began again when the group frolicked on. "He's after a new wife and accepted our invitation to meet you."

"Our invitation?" Alanna's eyes rounded. "Dunwhinnie has had three wives. He must be fifty summers."

"None of them gave him an heir." Aunt Nettie pulled her inside the hall, away from the door and into the shadows of a stair tower. "His castle is three times the size of Seacliffe and he has enough riches to fill it to its noble rafters. You'd be a countess, your cares done with and over."

"Oh, nae." Alanna shook her head. "He won't do." *He's said to be insatiable, a wild beast in matters carnal, keeping his women abed for weeks on end.* Alanna closed her eyes and drew a long breath, keeping that tidbit of gossip to herself. The earl's lustful ravennings were rumored as the reason of his wives' early deaths.

Tongue-waggers said he wore them ragged.

Her aunt wouldn't care. She viewed nobles as gods, would overlook any fault.

"He wouldn't come all the way up here if he didn't think you worthy." Aunt Nettie's gaze flicked over her. "'Tis said he favors fair-haired, blue-eyed lassies. He should be right taken with you."

He can take himself right back to Dunwhinnie, Alanna almost blurted.

"I will treat him with all courtesy when he arrives." She broke away from her aunt to pace back and forth at the base of the stair tower. "But you should not have suggested such a meeting. I'm surprised he even considered, truth be told. There are plenty women eager for lofty titles.

"I am not." She stopped pacing, set her hands on her hips. "I only want peace."

Nor will I carry his demise on my shoulders should he perish if I agreed.

That, too, she kept to herself.

Truth was, by all accounts, Durward Lovat was a fine enough

man – excepting his bottomless thirst for coupling. “Dunwhinnie would never leave his holding and I will not live anywhere but here,” she said, grabbing the least arguable objection. “Indeed, as the last Seacliffe Grant, I cannot.”

“As a countess you could do as you please.”

“I have duties, obligations.” Drawing a deep breath, Alanna rested a hand against the wall, taking strength from its cold, age-smoothed stone. Then she tossed down the truth even her aunt couldn’t deny...

“There’s also the matter of Lovat’s cats. Folk say he has more than a hundred and they have full run of Dunwhinnie Castle. You’ve surely forgotten I can only be around a handful of cats before my eyes swell and I can’t breathe.”

“Pah-phooey!” Aunt Nettie gave her a fond smile. “Gubbie ne’er makes you sneeze.”

“Gubbie is one cat.” Alanna looked at her aunt, wondering if dottiness was mashing her mind. “You know I tried bringing in more so he’d have friends. I nearly died. Having to find homes for them all nigh broke my heart.”

It had. And the pain still had the power to shred her soul.

But her aunt only tsked, making light of her concerns.

“We will speak of this later,” Alanna said, standing taller and using a firm voice. She had earnest reasons to marry no man and, for sure, she wouldn’t wed Dunwhinnie, earl, prince, or whatever. “It’s Yule and not the time for serious matters.”

“Humph.” Aunt Nettie’s face fell, but then lit almost as quickly. “Ach!” she cried, tilting her head to the side, cupping an ear. “I do believe the guisers are coming!”

Chapter 7

Seacliffe Castle bailey

In the midst of mayhem and merriment...

“You’ve run full mad.”

Callum didn’t bother to lower his voice as he frowned at his cousin. He did try to ignore the smell and itchiness of the bear-skin cloak slung about his shoulders. He wouldn’t think about why the heavy, black-furred monstrosities didn’t plague Grim and the other Mackintosh warriors who’d just accompanied them through Seacliffe’s gates and into the teeming bailey.

“I aye knew you Nought Mackintoshes are no’ like other men.” Callum brushed at the bear-skin. “Crazed, the lot of you.”

“Perhaps.” Grim shrugged. “Some men are born with a fire in their belly. Times like these ignite it.”

“We’re here to fetch a lassie – a lady,” Callum reminded him.

“So we are, and the madness as you call it, runs in your veins as well.” Grim glanced about the bailey, his sharp gaze at odds with his outlandish appearance. “Be glad. Boldness has its merits. You’ll need the wildness this night.”

“And you and your men look more like Viking Berserkers than Yuletide guisers.” Callum swatted at a swirl of wind-born ash. “Battle-thirsty heathens.”

Grim chuckled. “That’s no’ an insult to us.”

“Aye, well.” Callum lifted the Thor’s hammer amulet at his own neck, kissed it – an old family habit, or he aye believed. “My part remains the same.”

“So we agreed.”

“Dinnae forget.” Callum glanced at the others. “Thon men as well.”

The King’s band of Stewart kin stood a bit apart, but were just as crazed. Like Grim and the Mackintoshes, they wore bear-or-wolfskin cloaks, leather trews and jerkins, tall leather boots, and were hung about with silver chains thick with Thor’s hammers, bear claws, and

rough chunks of amber.

Horned helms similar to Grim's made them appear even more heathen, while a weird array of skull-or-bone-topped branches served as over-sized rattles they held high and shook whenever anyone looked their way. A few already leapt about, roaring nonsense in a language Callum assumed was old Norse – or not.

What he knew was that an even more unsettling collection of deadly-sharp dirks, long-swords, and broad-bladed axes were craftily hidden beneath all the guiserly fur.

Some clutched baskets of mistletoe and holly, tossing handfuls to the laughing, ale-taken merrymakers in the crowded bailey.

A place that teemed even more now, thanks to the large entourage of lofties just pressing through the gatehouse arch. These newcomers spurred their beasts straight for the stables, almost as if to escape Grim and his fake guisers, more than to simply dismount and have their fine-looking steeds properly tended.

"Madmen and worthies," Callum grumbled, shaking his head as Grim just smiled in a cold shimmer of winter moonlight. "This best go well."

It had to.

There wasn't another option.

And he didn't know where in Asgard's shining glory those words came from. But they echoed in his ears, lifting the fine hairs on his nape and sending a chill through him.

Then he knew why.

His ill-ease hadn't swept down from the home of the Northmen's gods.

The source was earthly.

"Ho!" He leaned out of his saddle, grabbed Grim's arm. "Thon lofties just now," he said, tossing a glance to where the finely-dressed men were just swinging down from their noble steeds. "Isn't that the Earl of Dunwhinnie?"

"Aye." Grim nodded. "Himself, and no other."

Callum frowned. "Do you know why he's here?"

"He will have his reasons." Grim said no more.

"Your silence is loud, my cousin."

"Time answers all," Grim returned, annoying as ever. "Word is he considers taking Lady Alanna to wife."

"Indeed?"

"So some say." Grim flicked a speck of something off his cloak.

“We will speak with him shortly. You can ask him yourself.”

“Nae interest.”

All the same, Callum stared across the bailey at the earl, a tall, well-made man, handsome in a deep russet cloak and bright mail tunic, the same high leather boots as the Stewarts, his great sword sheathed in a silver-and-jewel-studded scabbard. Younger-looking than Callum would’ve expected, he’d tied back his rich auburn hair with a leather band. He towered over the men in his party and walked with long, sure strides toward the keep.

“I dinnae like him.” Callum’s frown deepened the longer he watched the noble.

“He means the lass nae harm,” Grim said, watching the earl and his men disappear inside the castle. “His wife passed a while ago and he desires a new one.”

“So you said.” Callum bristled. “His presence changes naught.”

Grim’s brow lifted. “Shall we begin?”

Callum almost smiled. “Aye.”

“So be it.” Grim nodded to his men.

At once, they whirled faster, shouting as they waved their Yule branches high, leaping like fools as they surged across the bailey toward the keep.

“Till soon.” Grim nodded to Callum as well, then loped after his friends.

Hold fast, lassie. I will keep you safe.

As before, the words flashed across Callum’s mind, again coming from nowhere as he threw off his borrowed bearskin cloak and tossed it to the cobbled ground.

Then, his gaze on the keep and his heart thundering, he spurred his horse and raced straight for the great hall’s door.

Chapter 8

“They do be grand this year.”

Aunt Nettie clapped both hands to her breast, beaming as a troupe of guisers whirled and leapt about the hall. She glanced at Alanna, adding, “I dinnae ken any of them. They’re no’ from hereabouts, better than we’ve e’er seen.”

“So they are. They surely came with Lovat.” Alanna felt her heart sink as she watched the outlandishly dressed guisers shake their rattle-branches, toss balls of mistletoe, and drape swags of holly-and-ivy about revelers’ shoulders. One grabbed two wall torches, throwing them high and then juggling the fiery brands, his skill drawing cheers from everyone in the hall.

Aye, the guisers could only be from the earl’s household.

The longer she watched them, the surer she was. Only a high-ranking noble could employ such talented performers. And that meant he was here, or fast approaching. A truth that would end her pleasure in the feasting before the night had truly begun.

As if to prove it, a skirl of pipes and a blast of trumpets announced the Earl of Dunwhinnie and his entourage. Tall and resplendent in his finery, Durward Lovat strode into the hall as if he’d already claimed possession of Seacliffe, and her.

Not near the graybearded ogre she’d expected, he also proved quite good-looking. But his far-famed lustiness was apparent when his gaze latched onto Maili, Seacliffe’s bonniest serving lass, as she dashed through the hall with a basket of fresh-baked bannocks. Indeed, so great was Lovat’s interest in the laughing-eyed, bouncing-breasted Maili, he nearly tripped over one of the castle dogs.

Alanna didn’t care.

Far from it, she struggled to keep a straight face, the merriment welcome. Amusement would help her greet the man with a smile when he reached her.

But before he could, the keep’s door crashed back against the wall and a dark-cloaked horseman burst into the great hall. His huge beast reared, pawing the smoke-hazed air, and then slamming

his iron-shod hooves back onto the floor. As if to display his magnificence, the horse pranced in a proud circle. The rider, a man just as hot-eyed and fierce-looking as his steed, had a great sword in one hand, a broad-bladed ax strapped across his back, while a shield hung from his horse's saddle.

Clearly a warlord, his cloak didn't hide the gleaming mail beneath, or that his arms were thick with silver and gold warrior bands. A silver torque flashed at his neck – or so Alanna thought until it vanished before her eyes, replaced by an equally heathen Thor's hammer. The armbands were also gone, along with the torque, surely a trick of the firelight and smoke-hazed air.

The man was real, though, and bold, an almost savage look on his darkly handsome face. Alanna's breath caught and her pulse raced, something about him sending shivers all through her. And – she gulped – the odd knowledge that wherever he went, men would never forget him, weaving legends about him long after he spurred his great steed and galloped away into the night.

Or so he struck her.

Then he stood up in his stirrups and shouted, "Hail Thor and Odin! Merry Yuletide, all!"

Shocked silence answered him, and the excited barking of dogs. Somehow unable to move, Alanna stood frozen as he suddenly spurred his horse and plunged forward, knocking over full-laden long tables as he hurtled right at her.

"Lady!" he called to her as he neared the hall's double-arched hearth where she stood, Aunt Nettie beside her, gripping her hand. "Bid farewell to these foul auld stanes!" he roared, pulling up before her.

His high-strung beast snorted as he leaned sideways and reached for her – a move he couldn't finish because a great bear of a guiser with a wild mane of dark hair and silver rings glinting in his equally wild dark beard, broke through the crowd then and ran at him, shouting curses. This man plowed into the horsed intruder so hard that both men fell to the rush-covered floor.

The beast sidled, trampling fallen food and crockery.

Gasps, cries, and the sound of running feet filled the air as the two warriors rolled about, tightly locked together as they wrestled, toppled benches, and fought, seemingly bent on murder.

"Stop!" Alanna pulled free of her aunt's grip to dash forward, snatching an ale jug as she ran. "Have done now! This is my hall –

it is Yule!" she yelled, drawing back her arm to hurl the ale at the two men. "I forbid!"

"Nae, lady, I do," a deep voice, smooth and authoritative, broke in as the Earl of Dunwhinnie took the ale jug from her and tossed it aside. Thrusting her behind him, he yanked the ring-bearded guiser off the interloper and then drew his sword, raising both arms wide as he faced the man in clear challenge.

"You!" He stopped before the still-prone intruder, ignoring the man's agitated horse. "Stand and cast down your weapons," he commanded. "I'll spare your life if you do."

"Odin's balls, you will!" the other roared, glaring at him. On his feet in an eye-blink, he whipped out his own sword and cut a lightning quick arc in the air, the blade's sharp edge just missing the earl's arm. "My sword thirsts for a drink."

"Dinnae be a fool." The earl lunged, but the other man leapt back and spun, his scything blade a blur of silver, the clash of steel on steel echoing in the now-silent hall.

"Be gone and I'll no' spill your blue blood," the intruder snarled, edging forward, the point of his blade aimed at the earl's throat. "I'm no' fond of jarls."

"Jarls?" Dunwhinnie blinked, a mistake that cost him, the other's sword-tip now in his neatly-clipped red beard.

"Earls." The other flashed a smile. "There's no' a one worth living," he added, whipping up his blade and then slashing it down in a killing blow, a fountain of red arcing high as the earl crumpled to the floor, his life's blood pooling around him.

Alanna screamed, her eyes flying wide, dread sluicing her as the intruder whirled to grab her, somehow swinging up on his great black steed. In a flash, he clamped her across his powerful, rock-hard thighs, kned his beast, and galloped out of the hall.

"Put me down!" she cried, flailing her arms, trying to squirm from his iron-grip. "Now, at once! I am the lady of Seacliffe and!"

"So you are, and I ken your benighted home even better," her captor returned, his voice cold. "'Tis a cursed and foul place, by all accounts," he added as they raced across the now-empty bailey, through the gatehouse and into the night.

"Even the air here is tainted," he snarled, spurring his steed to even greater speed. "You should thank me for freeing you from such misery."

"How dare you!" Alanna fumed, fury heating her blood, making

her oblivious to the biting wind, the frigid air and slanting snow, as they pounded across the high moors, each galloping stride of the bastard's horse taking her farther from her home.

A thought that speared her heart, terror icing her innards, and not for herself, but for the one living soul she loved above all others and who she was now leaving behind.

Gubbie.

She'd sooner die than know him alone, worse in her aunt's care, a fate that would doom him.

Aunt Nettie meant well, but she didn't like animals.

She especially despised cats.

"Guuuubbie!" Alanna yelled, kicking and jerking as best she could, trying to break free. "Stop, please!" She twisted in her captor's arms, not caring if she fell. "Put me down!"

"In good time," came her answer, an odd thread of humor in his voice. "I'd ne'er have believed a lady would have so much fire in her blood."

"Then you've never met a Grant," she snapped, and bit his arm.

Rather than howl with pain, as she'd hoped, he laughed. "Is Gubbie your lover? Did he teach you to fight?"

"He isn't my lover." Alanna stiffened, Gubbie's sweet gray face rising in her mind. "But I love him above all else," she admitted, her voice cracking.

"Aye, well." Her captor slowed his horse to a canter, loosened his hold on her just the tiniest bit. "My sorrow that he'll no' be seeing you this Yule."

"You bastard," Alanna hissed.

"A fiery tongue as well, eh?" The fiend chuckled.

"Take me back or you'll rue the day you ever set foot in my castle."

"I already do."

Alanna huffed, her hands clenched so tight, her fingernails scored her palms. After all, this man - *this fiend* - had just slain an earl. As she wasn't ready to die, she didn't want to rile him overmuch.

Still...

Her cat was her life. She couldn't, wouldn't abandon Gubbie. But what could she do? Feeling lost, furious, and desperate, she decided to wheedle.

"Gubbie needs me."

"Him again?" The dastard glanced down at her, his shaggy dark hair dusted with frost. "Sorry, lass, he'll have to do without you."

"He can't." She glared back at him, tears stinging her eyes. "He's old and-"

"A graybeard?"

"Of a sort, aye." She managed to free an arm, swiped the back of her hand across her cheek. "Gubbie is my cat."

"My sorrow, then."

"Nae, your fault." Alanna's stomach clenched to imagine Gubbie waiting in her bedchamber, worried when she didn't appear. "You must take me back to him."

He shook his head, some of the snow in his hair falling onto her. "That's no' possible, lassie."

"It must be." She wouldn't give up.

"You're staying with me, sweeting." Moonlight glinted on the hard planes of his face, eyes that held hers, seeming to look deep into her soul. "Your Dubbie can-"

"Gubbie," she corrected on a sob.

"By the gods!" he snarled, tipping his head back to scowl at the snow-clouded heavens. When he looked at her again, his handsome face was fierce. "Only because it's Yule, my lady. Only just."

Alanna's heart slammed against her ribs. "We're turning back?"

"Nae, I am," he said, confusing her.

"But-"

"I'll fetch the cat," he said, jerking the reins, turning his horse round, then pounding away in another direction.

The wrong one.

Alanna twisted to look up at him. "Sir, you're-"

"Callum," he said. "My name is Callum."

"Sir Callum, Seacliffe is behind us."

"I am no' a sir," he told her, his tone cold again. "And I know fine where your home is," he added, his gaze on the vast, snow-crusted moorland spreading before them. "I'll ride to Seacliffe on my own, after you tell me where I'll find your Gubbie."

"And me?" Alanna kept her gaze on his profile, something about the blade of his nose, the slant of his strong, dark-bearded jaw, making her breath come harder. "You can't leave me out here."

"Och, nae?" He shot a glance at her, then spurred his horse toward the horizon, there where a line of tumbled boulders seemed to roll away to forever, their tops covered with winter-dead

heather, the dried blooms white with snow.

“Gubbie is afraid of strangers,” Alanna argued. “He won’t go with you.”

“He willnae have a choice.”

“Nor do I,” she muttered, as much to herself as to him.

“Aye, you do.” He sounded so sure. “I’ll leave you at the farthest edge of the world – or so the place seems. You’ll have two plaids to keep you warm, a flask of whisky for the same reason, and a few bannocks, though they may be hard.”

“And if I run away?”

“That’s your choice. You can be wise and wait, or you can take off and regret your foolery.”

“My people will help me.” Alanna’s mind raced, trying to gauge the distance to help, the nearest farm or croft, and if she could make it there, given the cold and snow. “Some dwell hereabouts.”

“No’ where I’m taking ye.” He shuddered – or so she thought, having felt the chill rush through him. “Nae man lives there, or would want to,” he finished, slowing the horse as the line of stones drew ever nearer. “Besides, you want your cat, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Then you’ll stay put.”

Alanna’s breath caught. “What are you saying?”

“What I just did.” He had the nerve to smile. “Disappear and you’ll ne’er see me again. Or him.”

Chapter 9

“Thor’s frozen dangles!”

Callum muttered the curse as he reined in behind an ancient, now-empty byre a good sprint from Seacliffe Castle. Satisfied no one had seen him, he swung down from Storm, his borrowed steed, a spirited beast said to be one of the Stewart band’s favorites. Understanding why, he led Storm into the ruin.

Sorry he didn’t have a sack of oats or a handful of carrots for him, he scooped armfuls of snow into an old stone trough, hoping the horse could at least slake his thirst – if the poor thing didn’t mind freezing his teeth.

He deserved to freeze.

At the least, he knew a loathing he’d never thought to aim at himself, prizing charity and honor as he did.

Had he truly threatened an innocent lass that she’d never see her pet again?

Aye, he had.

And he couldn’t believe he’d stooped so low.

He loved cats.

Truth be told, where animals were concerned, he had more in common with his animal-loving cousin Grim than he cared to admit. Any beastie, furred, feathered, scaled, or finned, he cared about them all. A reason he was now creeping along beneath Seacliffe’s stout curtain wall, looking for a hidden door he hoped to the gods he’d find. A secret entrance marked by a stone that, so Lady Alanna, resembled the hawkish face of scowling seabird.

She’d revealed the secret with tear-shimmered eyes, begging him to hurry lest her aged cat fret too much over her absence. More damning still, she’d pleaded with him not to harm the cat. Callum frowned, remembering her fear, sure the memory of Dunwhinnie in a pool of blood, was a reason she’d think him brutal enough to harm her pet.

A man bold enough to slay an earl had to be a craven.

He knew he wasn’t – or was he?

Fuming, he fisted his hands as he stalked along the wall, his

gaze on the stones.

They all looked the same.

"And you're an arse, MacCulloch," he muttered, glad at least that the clouds had parted, letting the moon bathe the high stone wall in silvery light.

Still...

While moonlight would help him spot the frowning-bird stone, it also made him just as visible.

That wasn't good.

The last thing he needed was to run into Grim and his Mackintoshes. Worse, the Stewart rowdies who'd no doubt report back to their royal kin that he'd left Lady Alanna alone on the high moors, nothing but two ratty plaids from the Skerries and few stale bannocks to sustain her.

He doubted the Crown would be pleased that he'd abandoned her to fetch a cat.

Only Grim would understand.

But given the gravity of their mission, even his cousin would be grieved, vexed as surely as the piercing-eyed, fierce-faced bird stone looming just ahead.

Praise the gods.

Quickening his steps, Callum gripped his Thor's hammer and sent a quick thanks to the gods.

Then he pressed two fingers against the bird's eyes, just as Lady Alanna said to do. Blessedly, the thick stone door eased open, its grinding screech low enough to be drowned out by the wind, and the roar of breakers crashing against the rocks so far beneath the castle's cliffs.

As the lady promised, stone steps wound upward. Dark, dank, and musty, the only light spilled down from narrow slits carved at intervals in the stair tower's walls.

Eager to be done with his mission, Callum climbed the steps round and round, counting each landing until he reached the fifth – the one, so the lady, where he'd find her bedchamber by the light beneath the room's closed door.

Gubbie, apparently, didn't care for the dark.

For that reason, perhaps, wall sconces burned low along the yawning passage, a boon that made it easy to spot the telltale golden line beneath a fine oaken door a bit farther ahead down the corridor.

Moving with a speed and stealth he'd learned as a youth in the Skerries, he was at the door and inside the room before a less-skilled soul could've blinked.

Unfortunately, he seemed to be alone.

An aged, decidedly plump gray cat was nowhere to be seen. Nor did he hear any furtive scurrying. Not even the low, unmistakable snores of a sleeping beastie.

Too bad for Gubbie, he'd known more than a few cats in his time.

And so, again using his ability to move as silently as thought, he went straight to the massive four-postered bed. There, he dropped to his knees to peer beneath the high mattress and right into the old cat's round, glowing eyes.

"There you are, eh?" He spoke softly, using the tone he wended on all cats.

This one wasn't impressed.

Indeed, the cat ignored him.

"Your mistress sends her greetings, laddie," he said, glad none of his friends back on Skerray could see him now. "Come on out of there and we'll be away.

"I'll take you right to her," he finished, waiting.

Gubbie didn't move.

But neither did he bolt.

Bluidy hell.

Callum considered his options, half inclined to lunge for the truly round cat and be gone. He knew cats scratch and didn't care. Sakes, he had enough scars from them. But he also knew any sudden move might send Gubbie racing around the room – a flight that could well be heard throughout the castle. Cats in a panic caused a ruckus loud enough to wake the dead.

Just as a certain fair-haired lass with sapphire eyes was tempting enough to addle his wits.

She'd told him how to catch her cat.

Annoyed that he'd forgotten, he pushed to his feet and went to the room's hearth. A dying peat fire glowed there, not spending a sliver of warmth. Dried swags of silvered sea tang filled a basket that, he figured, usually held peat bricks. More of the ancient Yuletide decoration draped the nearby window arches, as did a few swatches of red-berried rowan. But he hardly glanced at what appeared to be her wish to celebrate a Norse-themed Yule.

Leastways, a seafarer's Yule.

Not that he cared.

She could fill the whole of this miserable castle with silvered sea tang, mistletoe, or even red beribboned nettles, the stinging kind – all the better to keep things lively.

Only one thing mattered now...

He needed to find the lidded jar of dried herring the lady swore he'd see at once.

Too bad, he didn't.

Not surprised, he jammed his hands on his hips and turned in a slow circle, surveying the room.

And then he spotted a round earthen jar on its side and half-buried in the floor rushes. It would seem Gubbie had knocked his treats off the narrow table by the window arches. Thor be good, the cat hadn't managed to open the jar.

That Callum could, sealed Gubbie's fate.

A truth made all the more certain when a shaft of moonlight slanted into the room, falling just across a leather-and-cloth sack neatly folded on one of the window ledges.

A large sack, and bearing sturdy straps.

Callum smiled, amused. Of course, the cat-loving lass had a means to securely carry her darling.

He just wondered why she'd not mentioned the sack.

No matter.

Glad that his task here was about to end, he opened the jar and retrieved a few bits of stinky dried herring. Then he shoved the re-stopped jar into a pouch at his belt, his smile spreading as he headed back to the bed, ready to again drop to his knees, this time luring Gubbie with a piece of herring.

As hunger often wins, he didn't have to bother.

The cat met him halfway, even pawing at his leg in his eagerness for a treat.

"Here you go, laddie." Callum leaned down, the herring on his open palm.

Gubbie moved in, eating delicately as many old cats do. Hoping the cat would forgive him, he swooped, snatching Gubbie and thrusting him in the carrying sack before the cat knew what had happened.

A few twists of dried herring sweetened the offense.

Then Callum, pirate of the Skerries, occasional aid to the greater

good, heir to Draugar Hall, and, if the truth be told, Seacliffe as well, made haste to leave Lady Alanna's bedchamber.

And in his company, a round and foul-breathed cat.

A quick dash down the musty old hidden stair, a lever engaged on the rear side of the creaky stone door, and they were free of Seacliffe's cloying grasp. Back out in the bitter cold of a frosty night, the ruined byre and Callum's borrowed steed but a stealthy run along the base of the curtain wall.

And so Callum took off, the cat-in-its-sack clutched safely against his chest.

They were almost at the byre when a shadow pushed away from the ruin's crumbling wall.

Grim.



* * *

"I knew you'd return," came his cousin's deep voice.

Callum scowled. "Did I have any choice?"

"Nae." Grim, the ring-bearded fiend, strode forward, his gaze flicking to the rounded sack tucked protectively against Callum's chest. "The lady's aunt is beside herself, fussing that her niece will all but perish without her beloved pet."

"There may well be some truth in that." Callum shifted Gubbie, easing him deeper inside the warmth of his mantle. "Such measures willnae be necessary as I have the oversized beastie."

"Then all is good." Grim nodded.

"Humph." Callum glanced round, sending his gaze along Seacliffe's curtain walls, then up to the moon-silvered battlements before he surveyed the rolling, snow-covered moors. A vast and empty landscape he'd soon be riding across, taking Gubbie to his devoted mistress.

He hoped she'd be there.

Not wanting to think otherwise, he turned back to Grim. “How is Dunwhinnie?”

“That peacock?” Grim chuckled, his beard-rings clacking in the wind. “He’s fine. He’s been given the best quarters in the keep, the late laird’s rooms. His men guard the door, no’ letting anyone near him, claiming...” Grim tailed off and shook his head. “They’ve embellished our original plan, putting round that one of the earl’s retainers is a healer and surgeon. In truth, the man is Lovat’s champion knight, but he plays his part well.

“He ordered boiled water to clean Lovat’s wounds, but as you know...” Grim lowered his voice. “There isn’t a scratch. The water served to wash away all the chicken blood.”

Callum nodded. “No one suspects?”

“Gods, nae.” Grim tossed another glance toward the castle. “The earl moans and groans enough, lets it be known how glad he is to have worn his leather-lined mail, claiming its thickness spared him a killing blow from your sword, leaving him only with a slight, but bloody flesh wound.”

“Folk believe him?”

“So it seems.” Grim shrugged. “If they don’t, how many would call an earl a liar?”

Callum chuckled. “True enough.”

“Indeed.” Grim lifted a hand, brushed snow from his shoulders. “The King thought it through well. Nary a soul would dare lift Lovat’s shirt, so discovering the ploy.”

“And now?”

“His champion, the knight pretending to be a surgeon, will insist Dunwhinnie and all his men stay at the castle until the earl is fully recovered. He’ll demand hospitality until his lord is well enough rested to travel.”

“And when he is,” Callum mused, “he’ll be leaving with the fiend who’s been trying to kill Lady Alanna.”

“That’s the way of it.”

“What about you and your Mackintoshes?”

“We will do what we do best,” Grim said. “After we’ve seen you and the lady safely to the Skerries, she’ll remain secure in your trusted care, and we’ll return and do the darker work here. We’ll look in corners and under rocks, not giving an inch until we have the miscreant.”

“Dastard.” Callum gripped his sword hilt, a twist of his gut

making him eager to spirit Lady Alanna away to Skerray. “Who would harm a woman?”

“We shall see.” Grim touched the Thor’s hammer amulet at his neck, an almost identical one to Callum’s.

“I’ve nae doubt,” Callum agreed, wondering as so often how easily his cousin dragged him into his adventures in service to the Crown. Duties few would wish to execute, and even less would care to know about, too busy in their own lives to ponder how peace in the land rolled along so seamlessly, given the hotheadedness and intrigues rampant between the clans of Scotland.

How disturbing that he was sure this was something else.

Something personal.

Sure of it, he gripped his cousin’s shoulder. “Tell Dunwhinnie to watch his back. The next sword swipe might be a real one.”

“He knows that.”

“Guid, then.” Callum nodded. “Then I’d best head back to the lady. Gubbie’s getting restless and I’ll no’ be stopping should he need a break.”

Grim chuckled. “’Tis easier with dogs and dreagans,” he said, smiling again.

“There’s no such thing as stone dragons.” Callum smiled, as ever amused by his cousin’s belief in the mythical beasts said to roam his home, Nought territory in the Glen of Many Legends. “You’ll ne’er convince me.”

“Dinnae be too sure.” Grim’s smile deepened, crinkling his smoke-gray eyes.

This time Callum laughed. “I’ll tell you what is true. Next time it’ll be me plowing into you, you heathen ox.”

“Have bruises, do you?”

“A few.”

“Then we can enjoy a good, friendly fight once all this is behind us,” Grim proposed, thrusting out a hand. “Agreed?”

“I’ll hold you to it.” Callum grasped his cousin’s wrist, nodded when Grim returned the grip. “Till then.”

“Take care of the lass,” Grim urged him, serious again.

And then he was gone, disappearing into the slanting snow and mist, all that remained of him, the clacking of his beard rings and the rustling of his bearskin cloak.

Callum pulled a hand down over his own beard, his mind once more on Lady Alanna Grant.

He felt a powerful urge to race back to her.

A desire that had little to do with her troubles and – the gods help him – everything to do with his heart.

He just didn't know why.

Chapter 10

She'd found the *Lovers*.

Alanna drew her captor's two tatty plaids tighter about her shoulders and ignored the chattering of her teeth, the numbness in her toes and fingers, and even her surety that her nose and ears had turned to ice and may never thaw.

Who cared that frost coated her brows, or that blowing snow kept landing on her eyelashes?

Other much more serious matters concerned her.

The *Yuletide Lovers* weren't a myth.

The two entwined trees were right before her, their almost-fossilized lengths, prone in the snow. As she'd always believed to be true, the trees did indeed embrace. And now, just as legend claimed, the magic of Yule let their love and devotion shine silver-bright in every root, along the trunks, even sparkling where the branches clutched, the ancient trees' crowns so close they could be kissing, or resting their heads on pillows of snow. The frigid air shimmered around them, the silvery glow almost too beautiful to behold.

Alanna stood awed, touched deeply by such incredible love.

Her soul soared as if something broke free inside her, even as her heart bled with an ache she hadn't expected.

Could the presence of love - *truest, shining love* – drench one to the bone and deeper, wringing so much emotion from every breath, that the yearning swelled beyond life, spilling out to stain a place for all time to come?

Is that what she felt here?

Residue of the boundless love shared by the long-ago Viking lovers, Torrad the Fearless and Kadlin?

Just as the bards sang?

Believing so, she shivered, blinked against the dazzling light now filling the small, sheltered glen. Unearthly sparkles whirled and danced in the snow, each one as bright as if every star in the heavens had shed silvery tears to fall down upon this sacred place, here where the *Yuletide Lovers* slept in eternal devotion.

Feeling more blessed than ever in her life, Alanna drew the plaids even closer and went to stand beside the fallen trees, wishing she could have seen them in their tall, living glory. Back in those distant days when the two Scots pines had sprung from the ground where the fleeing lovers found sanctuary from harm, if only for a short while.

They'd endured much, giving their all for the desperate young pair.

Now the four were forever bonded, the power of such selfless love uniting them across centuries, until the end of days.

Alanna stood as if frozen, half afraid to breathe lest she break the magic. She knew it was fleeting, a fragile gift revealed to her for reasons she couldn't guess. Perhaps the trees knew her? Could see into her dreams and heart and were aware of how many tears she'd dashed when listening to the storytellers honor them? How often she'd tried and failed to find them?

Was such a thing possible?

She had to believe so as the fallen trees had certainly not gleamed silver when her captor – *Callum* – had brought her here, leaving her in this place he'd sworn no soul would find.

The trees had been dark then, blackened and worn smooth by age, their limbs barely visible beneath the snow. Only when he'd left to fetch dear Gubbie did the wind quicken, blowing the snow off the prone *Lovers*, revealing them in all their glory.

"Oh, my." She pressed her fingers to her lips, her skin tingling as realization sluiced her...

The trees wanted her to see them.

"Dear gods." Heart fluttering, she turned to look back across the snowy moors, peering through the whirling silver sparkles and snow to see if Callum neared.

She saw nothing but blue-white snow drifts, the line of tumbled stones that resembled furled waves on a frozen sea, and twinkling stars in the cold winter sky.

And it was then that she noticed the whirling silver sparkles were gone.

Whipping around, she found the magic wholly gone. The *Yuletide Lovers* no longer shone brighter than the heavens, though the trees were still passionately entwined, their age-darkened wood poignant but no longer enchanted.

Did I no' tell you we'd be safe here? No power on earth will part us.

The words came on the wind, hushed softly at her ear. A man's voice, distant yet near. Unlike the voice of anyone she knew, but so familiar, its smooth resonance stroked her soul.

Chills washed over her, shivers that had nothing to do with the cold. She could almost feel the man's presence. As if he stood beside her, his warm breath stirring her hair, his hand resting protectively at the small of her back. But then she felt a fool as another wind-blown sound came to her...

Horse's hooves striking the winter-hardened ground, iron-shod might echoing across the frosty night, muffled only slightly by snow. A single rider fast approaching the little glen so deep in Seacliffe's high moorland where she stood shivering beside the fallen trees.

So, ye chubby lump o' fur and herring breath...

Did I no' say I'd take you to her? No power on earth will part the two of you.

I promised.

More words on the wind, recognizable this time, and for reasons she didn't want to consider for these words turned a murderer and kidnapper into a hero.

He was almost at the glen and he had Gubbie with him – she could see both. The big, dark-cloaked man, his mailed shirt almost as silvery-bright as the trees moments before, her darling Gubbie tucked deep in the warmth of his carrying sack, his rounded bulk clutched securely beneath one of Callum's hard-muscled arms.

Alanna's heart burst and she ran, skirts yanked high, her feet racing across the snowy ground. How could she have doubted he'd return? Feared he might harm Gubbie?

In truth, she knew why.

He'd slain a man before her Yuletide hearth – and not just any man, but a noble.

She hurried on all the same, something deep inside her banishing her fear.

"Ho, lass!" He reined in, leaping down from the great beast's back only to seize her by the waist and swing her up onto the saddle. "I'll no' have you twisting an ankle, running across icy ground," he said, taking the reins and leading the horse into the shelter of the small glen flanked by high, stone-roughened hills but open on one side to the vastness of the moors.

"I am fine." Alanna pushed back her hair, aware of the strangest

sensation that time spun around her, as if they'd exchanged these words before. "Grant women don't fall easily."

"Then all is well. Your no' so wee friend would ne'er forgive me otherwise." He tossed her a glance, his arm once again supporting Gubbie. "That willnae do. No' after I went to so much trouble to fetch him for you."

"You really did." Alanna blinked against the heat pricking her eyes. "And you found his carrier," she added, her voice catching. "I made it for him years ago, when he turned too lazy to walk with me. I thank you, more than I can say."

"Aye, well." He smiled, looking much less hard-faced and fierce, and much too handsome for a brigand. "Could be if you fed him less, he'd move about more?"

"As for thanking me..." His smile faded. "'Twas nae bother."

"Please, let me have him." She swiped a tear off her cheek, not caring if he saw. She needed Gubbie close, snuggled against her heart. "I've missed him."

"He surely missed you, too. A big lout like me is no' so fine a companion as you."

"Then give him to me." She reached out for him, again surprised by how comfortable she felt in his company. How safe, as if he wouldn't let anyone harm her.

And yet...

The image of Dunwhinnie rose in her mind, again reminding her that he wasn't a gallant, or even a good man – not when he'd killed someone right before her eyes, in the midst of a Yule feast.

He was an outlaw.

And there wouldn't have been a need for him to fetch Gubbie if he hadn't kidnapped her.

Still...

Her heart thumped when his hands brushed hers as he lifted Gubbie into her arms. More damning, when he took a moment to slip the carrier's straps over her head, easing them in place across her shoulders. Something inside her melted then and for a frightening moment as he stepped back, his face blurred before her, changing somehow, yet staying the same.

His hair remained dark, though unbound with a few tight braids woven into its thickness. His eyes, no longer green, but the light blue of a summer sky. His features altered as well, but he was still recognizable, and handsome.

Then she blinked and the oddness ended, leaving only the pounding of her heart, a shocked dryness in her mouth.

She swallowed, hoped he couldn't tell.

She did glance at the fallen pines, wondered if he knew their story.

"Aye, I ken the tales," he said, following her gaze. "Bards' babble, nae more."

"I believe." She slid from the saddle, not wanting him to touch her again. "I have seen them turn silver."

His brow lifted. "Is that so?"

"It is."

"They look like ordinary fallen trees to me." He strode over to the *Lovers*, bent for a closer look. "Old, for sure, but no' silvered."

"Of course, they aren't." She reached inside the plaids draped around her, rubbed Gubbie's neck and shoulders. "You spoiled the magic."

He straightened. "Are you saying you saw them turn silver now, this night?"

"Aye." Alanna nodded. "The night mist, too."

"Highland mist often looks silvery. Moonlight, as well. There's nae magic to it. 'Tis the weather."

"I disagree." She looked at him, again feeling as if she were slipping into a void, spinning round as she fell, tingly chills once more rippling through her. "There is much enchantment in our hills. It beats in every stone, each sprig of heather, the gurgle of a burn, or even the curl of peat smoke."

"Such wonder is especially potent now, at Yule." She held his gaze, not caring what he thought of her.

He frowned. "I wouldn't have taken you for a lass to believe tall tales," he said, pulling a flask from beneath his cloak and thrusting it at her. "Drink this. 'Tis *uisge beatha*, strong and peaty whisky to chase such foolery from your mind."

"It'll also warm you for our journey." He walked back to her, stopping but a breath away. "We'll be sailing through the night, so you'll need it."

Alanna's jaw slipped. "What?"

"Sailing," he said, looking at her as if he thought her daft. "Traveling by sea, lassie. In a ship."

"I'm not going anywhere on a ship."

"Aye, you are." His tone was firm. "You're no' in a position to

argue.”

“It’s dark.”

“Nae too dark,” he shot back. “There’s plenty of moonlight and star-shine, the snow helps, too.”

“You’ve planned this.” Alanna seethed.

He shrugged. “I’m telling you this night’s perfect for a journey.”

“You’re a fiend.” Alanna stared at him, dread sluicing her. Just moments ago, she’d felt safe with him. Clearly, she’d erred. He was a brigand through and through. A cold-blooded killer and – was it possible? – perhaps the one behind all her grief?

The many losses that plagued Seacliffe and her family. The sorrow she tried so hard to shake, but that always came back to knock her down, each tragedy claiming a chunk of her, darkening her world, and, at times, making it so hard to even climb out of bed in the morning.

But she did, and always, she hoped.

She refused to surrender.

Yet now, here in this enchanted place she’d sought so long...

Her heart sank and she drew Gubbie closer, taking strength from his warm, bulky weight.

She met the blackguard’s gaze. “Where are you taking me?”

“The slave mart in Dublin.”

Alanna’s eyes rounded, the breath leaving her. “You can’t mean that.”

“Aye, I do.”

“I’ll scream and fight you every mile.” She backed away from him, raised her hands, fingers curled, ready to scratch. “Come one step closer and-” She broke off, stumbling over a pine branch. “Aggggh...” She lurched, flailing her arms before slamming onto her knees beside the *Lovers*.

“Owwww!” she yelled, pain shooting up her leg.

The brigand was on her in a beat, reaching for her, but she rolled away, pushed shakily to her feet. And it was then that she saw what hurt her knee so badly...

A heart-shaped piece a wood, age-blackened and smooth.

Quickly, she snatched it off the snowy ground, clamping her fingers around it. “Leave me alone,” she warned her captor, backing away again. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“What have you got there?” He caught up to her in two strides, gripped her wrist. “If you’re thinking to dirk me-”

“I don’t have a dirk,” she snapped, wishing she did. “I didn’t think I’d need one at my own Yule feast.”

“Then what are you hiding?”

“This.” She thrust out her hand, palm up. “A stone heart. Fossilized, from the trees.”

“Bluidy hell,” he muttered, seeming to blanch.

Indeed, he looked ill.

But before she could wonder why, he lifted her by the waist again and plunked her onto his horse. As quickly, he swung up behind her, and then spurred the beast, muttering beneath his breath as they galloped away into the night.

And this time she knew exactly where they were going.

To the coast.

Chapter 11

“Your trials will end soon, lass.”

Callum ground out the words as they rode across a seemingly endless stretch of high, snowbound moorland, making for a deserted farmhouse and, just beyond it, a little known track that wound down the cliffs and led right to where – he hoped – Grim and his men waited with Wave-Dancer.

He could breathe better now that Seacliffe Castle was far behind them, but it hadn’t helped his mood to pass the ruin of Draugar Hall, a pitiful shell of crumbling stone, its shameful silhouette dark against the starry sky.

Even Lady Alanna turned her face away, as if the tumbled remains of his ancestral home proved too great a disgrace to occupy Grant lands.

Aye, well.

So be it if the pitiful place offended her.

He found Seacliffe more distasteful.

But her silence annoyed him. If she didn’t soon speak, he’d address her as Lady Winter to honor her frostiness.

For now, he leaned down, whispered above her ear, “I said, you’ll soon be rid of your cares.”

“Oh?” She responded at last, her tone icy. “Will you be stopping here, surrendering your steed so I can ride home? Leave you to stride off to wherever pleases you?”

“This beast is no’ mine, sweeting.” He saw no reason to lie. In truth, spewing falsehoods was one of the reasons for the blackness of his mood.

He abhorred lies and even if his were for the lady’s own good and safety, they still tasted bitter on his tongue.

More unsettling, each bluidy one felt like a stab through his heart – as if he should be comforting her, even murmuring sweet words of love to her.

He wasn’t a sappy, dreamy-headed poet.

For sure, he believed in romance even less than magic.

A man’s sword and his honor, fighting to right wrongs were the

measure of his life, nothing else.

Still...

He didn't like how she'd stiffened on hearing the truth about Storm.

He leaned in again, tried not to inhale the fresh, lavender scent of her hair. "Storm is borrowed."

She huffed. "You mean you're stealing him, too. Are you not worried he'll be afraid at sea? Thrash about and hurt himself?"

"By the gods!" Callum swore. "Did you stick bog cotton in your ears? I said he's borrowed. He'll be going nowhere by ship. He belongs to a friend and we'll be returning him up ahead, at an abandoned farmhouse."

"The old MacCulloch place," she said after a moment. "There are ghosts there."

Callum laughed, he couldn't help it. "Haints and silver trees. Your greatest love, a fat and aged cat. Can it be, lassie, that you're of the fey or perhaps a hen wife?"

"A witch?" She slanted a look at him, her lips tight, eyes narrowed. "You'd be in trouble if I was. I'm not a fairy either, though I believe they exist."

"The truth is, folk hereabout talk of the MacCulloch farm," she told him – as if he didn't know fine what such tales claimed. "It's been empty for more than a hundred years, the farmer and his family disappearing without a trace."

Aye, 'tis said the farmer's son loved the family's laundress, but his father refused to let them wed. Furious, the high-spirited lass poisoned their dinner, thinking her love would be away that night. He wasn't, and perished with his kin.

Grief-stricken when she learned of the young man's demise, and horrified she'd be found out, the laundress dragged them all to the sea, pushing the bodies one by one over the cliffs.

Callum didn't recount the tale.

Lady Winter clearly knew.

"Your friend's horse will sense the spirits there," she said, reaching forward to stroke Storm's frost-dusted mane. "He won't be happy, he-"

"He'll be fine," Callum said, wondering why the faintest smile tugged at his lips. "My friend and others will be the only souls at that farmhouse and their spirits will be fiery Highland ones we'll enjoy before we set sail."

She straightened, stiffening. "To Dublin and its slave mart?"

"So I said."

"I will tell your friends," she argued. "There will surely be one with enough honor to help me."

"My friends already know where you're going."

She gasped, and then seemed to deflate. "I don't believe you. I will beg aid if need be."

"You're wasting your breath, lassie," Callum told her. "My friends won't take you home. Truth is, this was their idea."

"Then I am doomed." She released a long, audible sigh.

And her timing was perfect for just then the old farmhouse came into view, perched near the edge of a jutting headland, there for as long as fate and weather allowed.

Candlelight spilled from the windows and someone was just lighting torches thrust into the snow.

Grim and his men had been busy.

Still wishing the meeting place could've been elsewhere, Callum spurred across the remaining stretch of moorland, glad for once to see his cousin. The great ring-bearded lump was just stepping out of the farmhouse, his Nought Mackintoshes quickly joining him, and a handful of the King's wild Stewarts.

Lady Winter's misery was indeed about to end.

Regrettably, he feared his own was just beginning.



* * *

"You're the guisers!"

Alanna stared at the men gathered around her, recognizing some of them – even though they'd looked like denizens from hell the last time she'd seen them.

"Please..." She slipped from the saddle before anyone could help her, beseeched every man present. "You must help me," she

pleaded, clutching Gubbie to her breast. "This man" – she threw a glance at her captor – "keeps me against my will. He means to take me to Ireland, to sell me as a slave. I am Lady Alanna Grant as you know, mistress of Seacliffe Castle and-"

"We ken who you are, lassie." The largest man of the group, a hard-faced brute with Norse armbands and beard rings, inclined his head slightly, as if they were at court, exchanging niceties. "Why do you think we were at your Yule feast? We were there to fetch you. Nae man here will take you back to Seacliffe."

"You must sail away with us," he finished, his refusal to help her icing her soul. "We'll be leaving anon, down yon cliff-path and across the sea."

"Nae!" Alanna shook her head, her blasted eyes stinging anew. "This is a terrible mistake. You cannae do this!" She glanced round again, horrified to see that one of the men, one she didn't recognize, was already leading the horse toward a water trough and a half-barrel of what she supposed were oats.

They were truly doing this, stealing her away to a nightmare worse than all her troubles combined.

"Nae, please," she tried again, her mind racing. "I will pay you. I have silver enough, and my mother's jewels." She didn't tell them her mother had misplaced the jewels years ago, putting them in the wrong hiding place when her mind began to fail her. She'd search Seacliffe from its dungeon to the battlements to find every last gemstone if only these men would help her. "You will be rich, I promise you. Just help me, and-"

"Enough." Her captor strode forward, gripped her arm. "These men are my friends and we act as one. You'll no' convince them to take you back to Seacliffe if you beg them for a thousand years." Leaning in, he held her gaze, his own fierce. "Be glad of that, lassie," he added, speaking low. "Now come, 'tis time."

The words spoken, he nodded to the fierce-looking giant again, and then a few others.

These men came forward, tossed farewells to the others, and then, gathering so tightly around her that even a hand couldn't pass between them, they led her to the cliff's edge and onto a zig-zagging path to the crescent-shaped beach below. Men stood at intervals, holding torches to light the way.

Still...

Her dread grew with each downward step, for there, drawn up

in the sandy cove, was a long, low-hulled galley, high-prowed and single-masted, men already on board and looking eager to hoist its sail. Other men scrambled about on the sand, some with more torches, others clearly there to push and drag the ship into the sea.

A departure was imminent, the galley a hive of activity.

But what frightened her even more was the woman standing at the bow. Beautiful in a big, blowsy way, she was garbed like a gypsy and, as best she could tell, the woman had flaming red hair. A wild, curling mane, the tangled strands tossed by the wind.

Alanna knew her.

She was the woman she'd seen in her dream – leastways the one she'd imagined when she'd stood at her bedchamber window as a Viking warship flashed by, changing into a simple galley before her astonished eyes.

This was the same ship, she was sure.

The woman, as well.

Even more disturbing, the woman seemed to know her, too. She held a hand to her brow and was peering up at the cliff-path, watching their descent, a broad smile on her face.

Was she a slave, too?

Better said, was she soon to become one? Alanna didn't think so because the woman didn't seem at all frightened or concerned. Indeed, she appeared at home on the galley.

If anything, she looked amused. And something told Alanna she was the reason.

She just wished she knew why.

Chapter 12

“So you found her.”

Callum ignored Ula’s taunt. “We have the lady, aye,” he said as soon as Wind-Dancer slewed around the headland, catching the strong winter current. He stood in the bow, determined to keep his gaze on the churning sea before him and not on Blackie’s mistress with her all-knowing eyes and annoying smiles.

“I knew you would.” The she-vixen sidled up beside him, persistent as a sand fly. “Have you forgotten?”

Callum turned to scowl at her. “Aye, I’ve forgotten why I allowed you to come along.”

“I’m here to offer womanly comfort to the lady.” Ula pulled a ribbon from her cleavage, tied back her streaming hair. “You’d best tell her the truth, and soon.”

“In good time.”

“That is now.” She slid a glance at the rear of the galley where Lady Alanna sat on the only unmanned oar-bank, her cat-sack on her lap, her arms wrapped around it as if she feared one of the oarsmen would spring upon her, wrest Gubbie from her grasp and hurl him into the sea, carrying sack and all.

“She doesn’t look pleased.” Ula tsked. “I dinnae know you. When did you turn so callous? She isn’t crying or screaming. She will not swoon when you tell her.”

“Perhaps you are the forgetful one,” Callum returned, his gaze again on the moonlit sea, the northern horizon. “The danger remains until the coast sinks behind us. I doubt it will happen, but should we be followed and, gods forbid, taken, ’tis best if she thinks we’re stealing her away to sell as a slave.”

Ula tsked again. “I don’t like it.”

“You think I do?”

Callum closed his eyes for a moment, inhaled deeply of the cold, salt air, let his ears fill with the rushing of water along the ship’s hull. He loved the sea, sometimes even thinking he should have brine for blood. Sailing a fine ship across deep white-capped waters both thrilled and soothed him, and had done since he took his first

steps.

Just now...

He was only annoyed.

"She believes you?" Ula touched his arm. "About Dublin?"

"Aye. Grim and the others played their parts, as was necessary. If she knew the truth and blurted it to the wrong soul, even the Skerries wouldn't be far enough to keep her safe," he finished, wishing it wasn't so. "Dinnae think I've done this gladly."

Ula pushed a curl of spray-dampened hair out of her eyes. "You are right, of course."

"As are you." Callum reached out to steady her as Wind-Dancer rolled and pitched over a few long swells. "A while yet, and I'll speak with her."

"Cousin." A tap on his shoulder ruined his night. "The lady wishes a word with you," Grim said, his voice low.

"Hordes of Thor," Callum grumbled, sure his mood was about to worsen even more. "Stay here then, keep a sharp eye on the horizon – and all around us."

"Nae worries." Grim nodded once, then stepped into Callum's place in the bow.

Ula touched Callum's arm, her eyes twinkling again. "Remember what I told you. *Pale gold hair like a cascade of moonlight, eyes the blue of a deep northern sea.*"

She lowered her hand, clearly biting back a laugh, damn her.

"A Valkyrie, well-made and bold," she said then, making it sound like she'd announced the Queen of Scotland.

Callum glanced at the glassy swells, then back to her. "Should you no' grab a few plaids and sleep a bit?"

Her laugh broke free. "Who will win? The sky goddess or you with your Mackintosh Berserker blood?"

Behind them, Grim chuckled.

Ula tipped back her head, spread her arms to the star-studded heavens. "I'm betting on the Valkyrie."

Before she could say something to annoy him even more, Callum made his way down the ship's aisle, ignoring the men pulling on the oars, his gaze on the bonnie fair-haired lass tapping her foot, scorching him with her fury.

"Lady Alanna?" He dropped to one knee before her. "Are you no' comfortable? I can rig a sailcloth curtain if you–"

"I have no such need," she snapped. "We are sailing north."

Ireland lies in another direction.”

“So it does,” Callum admitted, done with keeping the truth from her. “Dublin and its slave mart was ne’er our destination,” he told her, speaking as gently as he could. “We’re heading to the Skerries, taking you there because-”

“What?” Her eyes rounded, her confusion lancing him. “The Skerries are as bad as an Irish slave auction. There’s no such place. It’s a mythical cluster of robber isles, a bard’s fable.”

“That’s your enchanted trees, sweeting.” Something made him reach out, cup her chin and glide his thumb along her cheek. When she didn’t pull back, he went on, “The Skerries are real enough. They just aren’t on anyone’s map. You’ll see for yourself when we reach Skerryay, the main island.”

“Assuming it exists, why are you taking me there?”

“For safekeeping, my lady.” He told her true. “It would seem you have friends in lofty places. King Robert himself ordered us to fetch you, secreting you away from mainland Scotland until his men find and deal with whoever has been killing members of your family and others close to you.” He lowered his hand, not liking how his heart thumped when he’d touched her. “Above all, he wishes you in the care of men willing and able to protect you.

“That is the reason for such secrecy, and why you couldn’t be told till now,” he continued, feeling like an arse all the same. “We do not yet know who would harm you, how powerful he is, or even where he is, how many men in his employ. We could’ve been followed on land, or at sea. Were you captured, it was thought best if you knew nothing about the Skerries.

“We would’ve gone after you,” he finished, “but if you’d mentioned the place we intended to take you, the craven could send men after you there as well.”

“Oh, my.” She let out a long sigh. “So it was all a ruse? The guisers and the kidnapping, everything?”

Callum nodded. “Highest command in the land.”

She looked out at the night-blackened sea, then back to him. “But I do not know King Robert. I’ve never even been to court.”

“Aye, well. He knows you.”

Her eyes rounded. “Oh! Is that why you killed Dunwhinnie? Did the King suspect him?”

“Gods, nae.” Callum stood and strode a few oar-banks up the ship’s aisle, bent to pull two rolls of sailcloth from a storage chest.

Returning to the lass, he rigged the waterproofed cloths into a quick shelter for her and her cat.

That done, he dropped down on the bench beside her. "You should have some privacy to sleep," he said. "And the spirits I promised you at the farmhouse." He pulled a flask from his belt, handing it to her. "Take a few gulps, and then we'll speak."

"Thank you." She unstopped the flask and lifted it to her lips, taking a few good, long gulps. "I needed that," she said, her eyes bright as she thrust the whisky back to him. "It is strong."

As are you, my heart. The words echoed in his mind. No, his memory, though he couldn't recall having ever said them.

Hoping he wasn't going addled as sometimes happened to men who spent too much time at sea, he pinched the bridge of his nose, tight enough to hurt. A nudge he needed to chase the foolery from his head and think clearly again.

"You will hang," she said, and hiccupped.

"Nae." Callum looked at her, her great blue eyes and silky moon-spun hair making his damned heart beat too fast again. Her breasts, full and round...

Ula was right, she did look like a Valkyrie.

And somewhere on her, she had a stony heart.

Pushing that thought from his mind, he fixed his gaze on a line of freezing fog along the horizon. "King Robert knows the kidnapping wasn't real. He ordered it, I told you. He'll no' be hanging anyone for following his own command."

"Of course, he won't. Not for that." She paused, drew herself up. "You'll hang for killing an earl. He may even have you drawn and quartered, send parts of you all around Scotland to land on stakes, warning others not to-"

"Och, nae." Callum took a swig of *uisge beatha*, refastened the flagon to his belt. "Dunwhinnie is fine. I didnae kill him. The fight was planned. He had sacks of chicken blood under his mailed tunic – mail lined with thickest leather. All I had to do was press the flat of my blade against him a time or two, and the blood flowed.

"Lovat and his retainers were sent by the King to lead the search for your enemy." He paused, glad to see her cat lumber out of his sack and curl into a huge ball on her lap. "After I left with you, the earl will have moaned and groaned, feigning an injury. A flesh wound no' serious enough to slay him, but bad enough to require a bed and recovery time at Seacliffe. His men and a good number of

the guisers belong to the King's most elite guards."

Lady Alanna blinked. "The earl is not dead?"

"Nae."

"But..." Her brow pleated. "He was there to meet me. He seeks a new wife and-"

"Nae, lass." Callum fisted his hands on his thighs, fought the urge to stroke her hair. "I have it from a good source that Lovat's recently betrothed to a French heiress from Edinburgh." He tossed a look at Grim, wished the lout had told him everything sooner. "'Tis a match arranged by the Crown. Lovat is at your keep solely to end the trouble there."

"Dinnae fret." He leaned in, the fiery *uisge beatha* perhaps loosening his tongue a bit too much. "The man's a fine earl, but no' so fine a husband."

"So I have heard. Still..." She shivered, rubbed her arms against the cold. "My aunt sent him an invitation to our Yule feast. He accepted."

"Ah, well." Callum reached over to pet her cat. "He would've gone anyway. Like as not, your aunt meant well and he was glad to oblige. She made it easier for him and his men, didn't she?"

She considered, her hand bumping his as they both sought to stroke Gubbie's head. "She will be stricken with worry."

"My sorrow for that, lassie." Callum meant it. Damage to innocents was a reason he disliked trekking off with his cousin whenever he needed an extra sword-arm on such missions. "Now that Lovat is at Seacliffe and with Grim and his men heading back there shortly, this'll be over soon."

"I hope so."

"As do I." *More than you ken, sweeting.*

The last thing he needed was a lady underfoot at Skerray. For sure, not one who minded him of a Norse princess and caused his heart to thump so hard. Worse, she stirred trouble lower down, setting off all kinds of nuisances.

Matters plaguing him even now, just sitting beside her as she pet her aged, stinky-breathed cat.

And that bode ill.

Truth was, he may not have truly kidnapped her, but already, he didn't want to let her go.

Chapter 13

Hours later, Callum left the steering oar and returned to the bow, thinking to relieve Grim, even more eager to gain a ship's length distance from Lady Alanna and her cat.

Freya's bosom, even the ancient lump of lard was growing on him. Last he'd peeked inside the sailcloth shelter to check on them, Gubbie had rolled onto his back and pinned him with a stare from where he rested beside his sleeping mistress.

Gubbie wanted a belly rub. Unable to hurt the old cat's feelings, he'd obliged, much to Gubbie's delight. The oversized beastie promptly purred a song, and then he fell asleep only to drool all over Callum's hand.

"Like that, do ye?" Callum had asked, not thinking for he'd forgotten to lower his voice.

Lady Alanna had pushed up on an elbow, her hair mussed, and looking way too delectable. "He loves belly rubs," she'd told him.

"So does every man," he'd said before he could catch himself.

"I am not surprised." She'd smiled.

Gubbie stirred again and yawned, releasing a cloud of herring-scented breath. Then he'd pushed his head against Callum's leg, again leaving a silver trail of drool.

Lady and pirate shared smiles and a chuckle then, a moment that sent him exiting her presence almost faster than Wind-Dancer raced across the swift-running winter seas.

Now, as they passed the sheer cliffs of an inhospitable island, home to only seabirds, rock, and wind, he wanted more of her laughter, the warmth he hadn't expected.

He couldn't recall the last time he'd enjoyed suchlike.

He did know he could've smiled and laughed with Lady Alanna for hours, even days or weeks, and not tire of the pleasure. Oddly, the moment was not just shockingly intimate. It also felt comfortable. Familiar in a way that disturbed him, for he felt a strange certainty that they'd enjoyed such times before.

And that was nonsense.

Nae, it scared him and he didn't like that at all.

Nothing had frightened him since he was a wee lad of ten summers or so, and his uncle's fishing boat sank beneath them. He was the sole survivor, his life saved by the two bravest men he knew...

His Uncle Lars who swam across cold, angry seas, wee Callum tucked under his arm, until his uncle thrust him between two jutting-above-the-water reef ledges, leaving him there in the hope a passing ship would rescue him.

And Blackie, who'd done so, slewing his galley round with a great plume of spray and then flying across the waves to where Callum faced certain death, wedged as he was between the jagged rocks, the tide rising.

One man died that day. The other lived. And Callum loved Blackie like the uncle he'd lost.

He took care not to let anyone else close to him.

The parting was an unbearable pain, something he remembered in his mind, distant agony that didn't lessen even though the years went on. Years that felt like centuries, and stretched into the deepest reaches of his soul.

So, nae, he didn't want to breathe in the fresh, feminine scent of Lady Alanna's hair. Nor did he want to admire the soft creaminess of her skin or the ripe curves of her body, her fiery spirit and remarkable ability to send his blood hurtling where it didn't need to go. Topping it all...

He didn't want to like her cat.

Whoever called a cat Gubbie, anyway?

He frowned, sure he didn't know.



* * *

"'Tis a fine night, eh?" trilled a merry voice beside him.

Callum's blood ran cold. Devorgilla of Doon, the great lady

herself, the Highlands' most far-famed cailleach here on Wind-Dancer in the small hours, in the middle of the North Sea?

Such a horror didn't bear consideration. Yet the chills racing through him and the weird crackling in the night air didn't lie.

It was her.

He whipped about, hoping he was wrong.

Of course, he wasn't.

And that was a problem.

He believed in meddlesome, supposedly magical Highland crones even less than enchanted trees and fairies. He especially didn't care for tiny old women who appeared out of nowhere and tied their boots with red plaid shoelaces.

But there she was, in all her terrifying glory. As always, garbed in black except for the red plaid laces and – Odin's balls! – instead of drawing her cloak's hood up over her grizzled, white-haired head, she wore a horned helm.

"'Tis for Yule." She cackled, lifted a knotty-knuckled hand to the ridiculous headgear. "Shall we celebrate with my own fine heather ale?"

Callum closed his eyes and wished her gone, but when he looked again, she was still there. Fumbling in the huge basket hooked on her arm. And then, as he knew she would, she pulled out two brimming cups of ale.

Callum ignored the cup she offered him. "How did you get here?"

"Och!" Her bright blue eyes twinkled. "The same way I get anywhere. I just-"

"Have done." Callum raised a hand. "I shouldn't have asked."

"Nae bother." She peered up at him, smiling. "I'll just say there do be advantages to my like, even if such as you dinnae believe in us."

"Great lady..." he began, using the title he knew she expected, not wanting to land as a lobster creeping along the seabed beneath the ship. "I believe in-"

"Swords, honor, and righting wrongs," she cut in, proving her canniness.

Callum frowned. "You aren't here to tell me that."

"True enough." She lifted one of the ale cups to her lips for a long swig. "I've brought ye a Yuletide gift."

"I've nae need of gifts." Callum crossed his arms – or tried.

Somehow the second ale cup was in his hand, the froth spilling down his wrist. "Holy gods!" He jumped, tossing the cup into the sea. "Dinnae do that again."

Devorgilla only chuckled.

Callum took a deep breath, hoped he was dreaming.

"Nae, you're no' asleep, laddie." Devorgilla drained her ale cup, then chuckled again when the empty cup disappeared. "You be wide awake, as ye should be, sailing this ship, eh?"

"Aye, and that's a good reason for you to leave." Callum hoped to Asgard his words wouldn't anger her. "We'll be nearing the Skerries with the rising sun and I need my wits about me."

"You also need what I've brought ye," she said, patting her basket. "Thon lassie sleeping behind her sailcloth back there needs it, too. That's why I'm here."

"Lady Alanna has all she needs." Callum hooked his thumbs in his sword belt, not wanting to speak of the lass. "She'll be fine on Skerray until she can be safely returned to her home."

Devorgilla glanced down the ship's aisle to where moonlight shone on the sailcloth. "Ye have the rights of it, ye do," she said, sounding amused. "She'll be going back to Seacliffe, for sure."

"Then there isn't a problem, is there?"

"No' with her return home."

"Then what?"

"'Tis about her cat." The crone turned back to him. "Gubbie scratched her in the night."

Callum blinked, wondered if the great Devorgilla of Doon was losing her magic. "That cat worships her. He would ne'er scratch her."

"Och, no' a-purpose." She hobbled closer, gripped his arm. "Remember when ye hit a rough patch o' water a while back? How your ship pitched and rolled?"

Callum nodded.

"Aye, well." The crone peered up at him. "Cats aren't fond of the like. Gubbie has ne'er been at sea, has he? He took a fright and scrambled over her as she slept, his claws scratched her right bad."

"How do you know that? Were you here then, too?"

"Of course, not." She tilted her head, her eyes twinkling in the moonlight. "I was in my bed back on my very own Isle of Doon, trying to get a good night's sleep."

"I see." He did, and he didn't like it.

“Dinnae you worry about how I knew. ’Tis enough that I did.” Digging in her basket again, she produced a small earthen jar, plugged with a bit of wood. “This be anti-cat scratch unguent,” she said, her red plaid laces glowing brighter on every word. “See you that she gets it on Gubbie’s scratches.”

Callum nodded, this time accepting her gift when she thrust it into his hand. “I will, great lady.”

He’d do no such thing.

As soon as the crone left – and he knew she would – he’d pitch the foul magic-steeped jar into the sea.

“See that ye do.” Devorgilla eyed him intently. “’Tis my Yuletide gift to ye both.”

At once, a plume of red sparkles burst from her red plaid shoelaces and she clapped her hands, cackling as wind caught the sparkles, carrying them off into the night.

“I’ll be leaving now, too,” she said, gone even as her words hung in the air.

“Guidsakes.” Callum pulled a hand down over his beard, shuddered.

Then he drew back his arm and pitched the jar into the sea.

Thank Yule, Devorgilla didn’t reappear to scold him. Nor did a cackle ring beside his ear. He heard only the whistling of the sea wind, the hissing of waves, and the less appealing snores of those men who now slept between the oar-banks or in the ship’s long and narrow aisle.

Otherwise, the night was quiet.

No Highland crone anywhere to be seen – or heard, praise Odin.

Relieved, Callum raised his arms above his head and cracked his knuckles. He’d surely imagined the entire unpleasant encounter. Highland magic and meddlesome old women belonged on the tongues of storytellers and not on good, seafaring galleys in the middle of cold and dark winter nights.

That was way of it.

Chapter 14

“A cup of morning ale?”

Alanna stirred and pulled the covers over her head, not sure she'd heard the lilting Irish voice. She also wondered when her bed had turned so hard and – dear heavens – why her bedchamber was rocking, almost like the motion of a ship.

Because it was ship!

A galley, and she was on it, being sailed to a fabled cluster of isles no one believed existed.

“Mercy.” Her eyes popped open and it all came flooding back, her kidnapping that wasn't, the late night ride across the snowy moors, and then the sea journey.

Now, in the gray light of morning, it was only too real.

“Gubbie!” She pushed up on her elbows, searching for him, seeing only the Irish beauty sitting beside her, a cup of ale in her hand.

“He is fine,” the woman said in her lovely, musical voice. “Sleeping near your feet, he is. Tucked in beneath the extra plaids Callum spread o'er you in the night.”

“Praise be.” Alanna's pulse settled, relief sweeping her. “I worried.”

“Of course, you did.” The woman smiled, her eyes warm.

Drawing a somewhat shaky breath, Alanna felt her cat's weight against her now, his warm bulk swelling her heart. She looked back at the woman, not wanting to move too much lest she disturb Gubbie.

“You've brought me morning ale.” She shifted on the oar-bank, tried not to wince when her back pinched. Clearly, she wasn't made for sleeping on rowing benches, a bed of extra plaids or no.

But she accepted the proffered ale, took a grateful sip. “Thank you,” she said. “I am Alanna.”

“Lady Alanna, I know.” The Irishwoman smiled again, a dimple appearing in her right cheek. “I am Ula, Blackie's woman.”

“Blackie?”

“Blackie Bain, Pirate King of the Skerries,” Ula told her, placing

a cloth-wrapped packet on the oar-bank. "Oatcakes and some cheese. 'Tis all we have until we reach Skerray."

"Thank you," Alanna said again, taking an oatcake. "Your husband is a pirate king?"

Ula's eyes crinkled. "We're not married, though we may as well be, long as we've been together. He fetched me from an alehouse in Dublin many moons ago." She leaned in, her tone conspiratorial. "Best thing that ever happened to him, I tell you," she finished, winking.

Alanna returned her smile, liking the woman. "Is he really a pirate king?"

"He likes to think so." Ula helped herself to a bit of cheese, smiling as she chewed. "In truth," she said after swallowing, "I suspect he likes the romance of pirates. What I'd call him is a king of broken men, but don't tell him I said so."

"Broken men?" Alanna blinked. "I always heard the Skerries were robber isles, home to sea raiders and pirates. Not that I believed such a place even existed. Bards spin tales about the isles."

"So they do, as they embroider many things." Ula paused as Gubbie poked his big gray head up out of the covers, fixed her with his green stare. "The Skerries are out there," she said, reaching to pet Gubbie. "They're just too bleak and cold and rocky to interest most folk. And they're so far out to sea that it's too much trouble to find them should anyone wish to bother."

"That's why the isles are such a haven for broken men." She scooted closer to Gubbie, smiling when he purred for her. "Clanless men and others who, through no fault of their own, belong nowhere and to no one. Those are the men Blackie leads, not true pirates."

"Indeed, I can't think of a single time any of them stole something from anyone," she said, sipping her own ale. "They do not raid or attack other ships. They lend their ships and swords to certain causes now and again. Times when might and secrecy is required, usually by high-placed nobles who have quibbles about certain engagements, matters that require a wee twist or bend in the laws – that's the best way I can describe our Skerry-men."

"You mean they're outlaws."

"Perhaps." Ula shrugged. "It depends on who you ask. The King would tell you Blackie and his men are heroes."

Alanna reached for another oatcake, beginning to understand. "Callum told me about King Robert and the Earl of Dunwhinnie. He

said the King wanted me brought to the Skerries. Somehow he knew someone has been trying to kill me.”

“So we heard.” Ula nodded. “The King’s messenger and his men came at the start of Yule. Callum left with them, and now you are here, or soon will be.”

“Why Callum? He didn’t say except once, claiming he knew my land ‘better than I do.’”

“And so he might.” Ula peered through the tiny gap in the two sailcloths, lowered her voice. “Did he tell you his name?”

“Only Callum.”

“I am not surprised.” A shadow passed over Ula’s face. “He’s a MacCulloch. Centuries ago, his family built Draugar Hall, the ruin on the cliffs a good way from your home, but still on your land. His ancestors came from the Northlands. Vikings, the family aye believed. Whoever they were, Scotland wasn’t good to them. Time passed and their luck ne’er improved. When one of their lairds allied himself with the losing side of another clan’s blood feud, they lost all and Draugar Hall fell to ruin.

“The Draugar MacCullochs believed the first ancestor to land on Scottish soil brought Viking treasure with him. Family legend tells that he hid the treasure in caves along north Scotland’s coast, but no one could find it.

“And so...” She shook her head, sighed. “The family suffered, were forced to leave their home and land. They became fishing folk like so many who fall on hard times in those parts, but...” She took a sip of ale. “Their bad luck followed them and they became embroiled in a fight over fishing grounds. That strife lasted generations and cost Callum his father and later his uncle, who raised him.

“Callum’s uncle’s enemies ran them from their land, giving the family no choice but to flee by boat. Only-”

“Dinnae tell me someone did something to the boat?” Alanna had a strange feeling that was so.

Ula’s nod proved it. “Aye, or so Callum believes.”

“How terrible.”

“It is, or was.” Ula sighed. “He was but a lad, and the horror marked him. The boat sank too far from shore for any of them to swim back. Callum’s uncle grabbed him and jumped overboard, just making it to a reef where he thrust Callum onto the rocks, or a ledge, I’m not sure. Blackie happened to pass by and saw him,

pulling him from the sea and bringing him home to Skerray.

“Blackie is only ten years or so older than Callum, but he raised him as his own son.” Ula leaned back, pressed her hands together. “That’s about all I can tell you about our braw Skerry-men. All the lads have such tales in their past and they dinnae like talking about things they cannae change.”

“I’m glad you told me.” Alanna’s mind raced, trying to absorb everything the Irishwoman revealed. “If I understand rightly, then Callum is heir to part of my land. Leastways Draugar Hall and that stretch of moorland,” she said, other thoughts swirling as well, ones she didn’t yet want to share.

“That is how he sees it, aye.”

“With reason, I’d say.”

“He’d smile to hear you say that.” Ula reached over, squeezed her arm. “He goes there now and then, pokes around the sea caves and climbs the cliffs to brood about the shell of a ruin that was once his family’s pride.”

“I am so sorry.” Alanna’s heart hurt, her chest tightening. “I can’t imagine losing Seacliffe. It would shatter me.”

“Ah, well, I don’t think you need to worry.” Ula pushed to her feet, brushed at her skirts. “With the King looking out for you, it’s no’ likely you’ll lose your beloved home.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I usually am.” The Irishwoman winked. “Leastways about matters of the heart.”

And then she ducked out of the sailcloth shelter, leaving Alanna alone with Gubbie, her aching back, and a lot of whirling thoughts. Callum MacCulloch wasn’t a pirate any more than he was a kidnapper, but he was heir to a place closer to her heart than he would ever dream.

She just didn’t know how or when to tell him.

Chapter 15

“So, lassie, what do you think of Skerray?”

The big man stood before Alanna in the middle of the island’s broad sandy beach, his booming voice rivaling the pounding of the surf. His wide smile flashed bright in the morning’s damp, gray gloom. In the distance, sheer black cliffs dropped straight to the sea and whatever lurked anywhere else was hidden by the long wisps of cloud that drifted everywhere.

Alanna didn’t care, for the big man – Blackie Bain, Pirate King of the Skerries, had charmed her from the start by wading out into the water and insisting Callum hand her into his arms so he could carry her ashore, so sparing her a dousing if she’d been rowed to the beach in such rough surf.

More than that, he’d done the same for Gubbie in his cat-sack and now stood cradling her cat, shielding him from the knifing wind. He smiled at Gubbie, the expression on his black-bearded face marking him a cat-lover.

For that reason alone, he won her heart.

“We have fairer days in summer,” he said then, glancing round at the men and women gathered on the beach. “Still cold, though!” He laughed, drawing mirth from all present. “That’s why our blood is so hot,” he teased, tossing a look at Ula. “’Tis the only way to stay warm hereabouts.”

“I live for the cold and wind,” Alanna enthused, loving the whirling mist, clouds so low she wondered they didn’t rest on the turfed roofs of the low, stone cottages that lined the shore. If there were more, she’d see them later, when the day cleared – if that even happened here, so deep into northern seas.

Skerray seemed a place of its own, harsh yet full of softness and haze. Cold, wet, dark, and all around, the roaring winter sea. To her, a wonder that took her breath and thrilled her soul.

No, she felt more alive than ever before.

“She was made for the North,” Blackie said, pride in his voice.

“So it would seem,” Callum agreed, standing beside him. “The cold and wild suit her.”

"That has always been so." She pressed both hands to her breast, hoped she didn't shame herself if tears spilled down her cheeks. In truth, she didn't care if they did.

She smiled at the two men, then at Ula and everyone else. Even savage-looking, ring-bearded Grim who, if she wasn't mistaken, appeared a bit misty-eyed as well.

"You are so blessed to call this place home." She turned to Blackie and Ula. "There is magic here."

Callum chuckled. "So speaks the lass who sees enchantment everywhere."

"Nae." She shook her head. "This is different."

"Humph." Callum crossed his arms, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

Ula beamed, her smile lighting up the beach.

The mists shifted then, parting to reveal fishing nets laid out to dry, a few upturned skiffs sleeping on the sand, well away from the kelp-marked tideline.

Gubbie wouldn't go hungry here.

And she was in love.

Awed, she turned in a circle, catching glimpses of huge piles of driftwood she supposed were for Yuletide bonfires, also glimmers of yellow in some of the cottage windows, the glow from candles, or perhaps fish oil lamps.

"Better than a Dublin slave mart, eh?" Blackie clapped a hand on Callum's shoulder, his dark eyes twinkling as he smiled at Alanna. "You have the rights of it, lass," he agreed. "There is no finer place than the far North, especially on nights of thick fog, the sea angry, churning, and so magnificent, a man can only thank the gods for giving us such grandeur."

"And I thank you." Alanna went back to Callum, her breath hitching when he slid an arm around her – until his splayed hand touched the place on her back that kept pinching. "All of you, as I know now that you spared me much grief. Even my life, it seems."

"Och, none o' that, lassie." Blackie slung his arm around Ula, drew her close. "That is what Skerry-men do, see you? We're a wild, easily pleased bunch, wanting only our mead, hearty food, our women and song, and a good fight now and then. But..." He tailed off, glanced at his people. "We dinnae hold with anyone being treated poorly. You are much welcomed here and shall be our guest until your beloved Seacliffe is safe again."

“Longer if it pleases you!” he added, flashing a grin at Callum.

“Aye, well.” Callum looked at her. “If she doesn’t soon get something more to eat than stale oatcakes and a few bits of cheese, she may change her mind about staying with us.”

He turned again to Blackie. “Ula said she can have one of the sheltered beds in the longhouse. Is that still so?”

“Nae.” Blackie shook his head. “Take her to Rock-pool Cottage. It’s clean-swept and readied for her.”

“She’ll be well placed there,” Callum agreed. “Thank you. I’ll see her there now.”

“Do that.” Blackie inclined his head, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “You rest yourself there, as well, laddie. Just have her at the longhouse for the feasting tonight.” Glancing at Alanna, he added, “Nigh every winter night is Yule on Skerray. You may grow tired of our merrymaking before you leave.”

Never. Surety swept Alanna, surprising her that she didn’t even miss Seacliffe.

“I will look forward to your Yule feast,” she told Blackie. “It will be my first one in a longhouse.”

“Truly?” Ula lifted a brow, her dimple deepening as she smiled. “Perhaps you’ve just forgotten?”

“Could be,” Alanna admitted, an odd chill slipping through her as Callum led her through the welcoming crowd and then down the beach, toward the cottage.

Built of thick, whitewashed stone walls, the cottage boasted a blue-painted door and two deep-set windows. Turf-roofed like the other cottages, this one enjoyed the shelter of the sheer black cliff that marked the end of Skerray’s beach.

“You made a grand impression, sweeting,” Callum told her as they neared the cottage. “Rock-pool is reserved for very special guests, usually Stewarts and now and again some Norse lordling or suchlike who chances this way.”

“Then I am honored.” Alanna glanced at Callum, then blinked for in the thick sea mist, he again looked slightly different. “Ahhh...” She stared, wondering how his eyes looked light blue, not green. But then the cottage loomed before them and he glanced at her, his eyes once more green as grass.

“Why is this Rock-pool Cottage?” She grasped at the first thing to say, before she could blurt something about his eyes, how his entire face had changed. Or worse, admit how hard her heart was

beating – and the shocking reason she suspected it did so.

“The beach is sandy.” She hoped he didn’t hear her breathlessness. “I don’t see any tide pools.”

“They’re on the cottage’s far side, beneath the cliff. Sometimes at night, they seem to capture the stars.” He opened the door. “Gubbie should like it here, too,” he added, standing back so she could enter the spotlessly clean cottage.

“It’s perfect.” Ridiculously, her throat thickened and she couldn’t say more.

Instead, she looked around, took in the well-swept wood-planked floor made homey with a few colorfully woven rugs, a small hearth with driftwood neatly stacked on the grate, ready to burn. She also noted the carefully scrubbed table with two matching chairs. Nearby, a rough-hewn shelf held wooden plates and bowls, a few dented pewter cups, and an earthen jug. A woven basket hung from a nail on the wall, handy storage for a long-handled ladle and a motley collection of eating knives and spoons.

Beside her, Callum cleared his throat. “’Tis no’ so fine as Seacliffe, but Ula tries to-”

“She succeeds.” Alanna hoped he didn’t hear the catch in her throat.

“Aye, well,” he said, his own voice a bit gruff. “The cliff staves off the worst North Sea wind. Nights can be colder in Blackie’s longhouse.”

“It’s snug here,” Alanna agreed, turning in a slow circle.

Across the main room, an arched opening led into a tiny kitchen, and then –her pulse fluttered – another arch waited at the cottage’s rear, this one half-covered by a looped spill of shimmering blue cloth clearly meant to lend privacy to the sleeping area.

A few oil lamps sat on the table, and the broad window ledges each held a candle, ready to be lit.

Best of all, and now her eyes misted...

Someone must’ve raced down the beach to place a soft bed of furs before the little hearth – a courtesy that provided the ideal place for Gubbie to rest.

A creel stood near the door, filled with clothes – lovely women’s goods, pretty much all she’d need, at a glance.

She turned back to Callum, swallowed the lump in her throat. “I don’t know what to say. Thank you is surely not enough.”

Neither are a thousand lifetimes, sweeting. But we survived them and

I've found you.

"Everyone here wants you to be comfortable and happy on Skerray," Callum was saying, not at all the words she'd heard.

Or had she?

She didn't know and wasn't going to ask. He'd already dropped to his knees before the hearth and busied himself lighting the driftwood piled there.

"I am grateful." She rubbed her hands, lifted them to ease Gubbie's carrier straps off her shoulders, so glad he'd now be able to roam free again – at least inside the cottage. But as she lowered the cat-sack to the floor, letting him out, her back pinched again and she cried out with the jabbing pain.

"Eeeee...!"

At her cry, Gubbie bolted into the teeny sleeping area where he'd surely hide until he was certain she wouldn't make any further weird noises.

But she did, wincing aloud when she reached round to press a hand against her left shoulder. "Owww, my back..."

Across the room, Callum pushed to his feet, the driftwood just beginning to burn, bluish flames licking the wood, the heady scent of the sea filling the cottage.

Any other time, Alanna would've gushed over the fire's beauty, the coziness of the cottage. But her back hurt like a hundred fire devils were clawing at her, and Callum...

He stood staring at her, a look of almost dread on his face.

"It's just my back," she told him, the pain already easing. "I think I pinched a muscle sleeping on the oar-bank," she added, wondering. "Or Gubbie accidentally scratched me. He sometimes does. His feet are ticklish so he won't let me clip his claws. They're razor sharp and cut deep."

"Gubbie scratched you..." He glanced at the low, dark-raftered ceiling, blew out a breath.

He'd gone pale as a ghost.

"Guidsakes," he said, pacing now. "By Thor and all his bleeding lightning bolts..."

"What is it?" Alanna hurried after him, her pain forgotten. "Are you ill?"

He stopped, swung round to look at her. "I'm no' sick, just mad. Losing my mind crazy-mad."

"Nae, I fear that might be me," Alanna admitted, all the strange

snippets she'd heard racing back to her, haunting her.

"Perhaps we are both crazed?" She felt a burning at her hip then, fiery as if he'd grabbed a piece of flaming driftwood and thrust it against her flesh.

But then the sensation vanished and – she remembered – it was only her little heart-shaped piece of wood from the *Lovers*. She'd tucked it into the pouch that hung from her belt.

Retrieving the luck-piece, she set it on the table, then crossed the room, hoping to lure Gubbie back amongst the living. But her blasted back pinched again when she reached to draw aside the sleeping area's blue curtain.

This time she only hissed, but Callum heard.

"Lords of thunder," he swore, sounding alarmed enough that she whirled about, hurried over to him.

"What is it?" She grabbed his arm, worried. "Are you hurt?"

"It's back," he said, pointing at the table.

Alanna followed his stare, seeing no reason for his shock. He'd seen her stony heart back in the *Lovers'* glen. Or was there another reason for his upset?

She couldn't imagine what.

The only other thing on the table was a small earthen jar.

Chapter 16

Callum stared at the innocent-looking jar on the cottage's table and knew it for it was...

Devorgilla's anti-cat scratch unguent, risen from the dark and freezing depths of the North Sea to haunt him, driving home that no man is the true master of his fate.

Destiny is inescapable and at times such as Yule, the gods and their minions like the Highland's own mischievous and meddlesome crone have their way with mortals.

And their amusement, he was sure.

"Holy gods," he muttered, not wanting to go anywhere near the jar, but somehow finding himself right beside the table, reaching for it, lifting it in his hand.

"Your back, sweeting." He turned to Lady Alanna, tried not to sweat because – *he was doomed* – the deep, Nordic-accented voice wasn't his. "If your cat has scratched you so deeply to cause you pain, the wounds must be tended."

She looked at him, puzzled yet saying nothing about the change in his voice. "The scratches will heal in time. They always do."

No' this time, my love.

Callum's gut clenched. The same voice, but now in his head. A horror that proved along with the crone's wretched gift, that his days were numbered.

A man could only come so close to such interactions with gods and immortals and not slip headlong into their nebulous realm, the world of the living and all things earthly, forever gone to them.

He shuddered, felt the damned jar begin to warm and vibrate in his hand.

Tamping down a curse, he drew back his arm, intending to hurl the jar into the hearth flames.

But...

His fingers only clutched the jar tighter.

How sad that he knew exactly how to be rid of the nightmarish unguent.

"Enough, lass." His voice again, praise Odin. "If you willnae

throw off those plaids and loosen your gown, letting me have a look at your shoulder, I shall remove them for you," he said, his tone and the words coming harsher than he'd intended. "I'll no' be telling the King I brought you all the way to the Skerries only to have you perish on cat claw scratches that festered."

"But-"

"Nae buts." He took two steps toward her. "Let me see your back."

"You said my shoulder."

"Aye, that, and your back." He took another step. "I would see them both."

She frowned. "You are mad."

He laughed, he couldn't help it. "Tell me something I dinnae ken. Now have done with the gown."

"Nae."

"Och, aye." One step and he towered over her, his heart thundering, his loins tightening, the granite hard length of him shaming him so greatly he wanted to roar with rage.

He wasn't a man given so easily to lust – of a certainty, not when he was angry.

Yet for reasons he couldn't explain, he burned with a ferocious need to grab her and crush her to him, swooping his lips down onto hers and kissing her again and again until the end of all days when, they'd start again, kissing for another thousand years.

"Ye, gods." He wheeled away from her, clutched his head with his hands. "Dinnae come near me, lady," he said, reason, and his honor, rearing up to battle the madness.

Grateful, he thrust his arm out behind him, offering her the little earthen jar. "This contains cream. An unguent to heal and soothe cat scratches."

She took the jar, gods be good.

"Did Ula give this to you?" she asked, the voice of innocence.

"Nae." He wouldn't mention the crone's name. Wicked as she was, it wouldn't surprise him if she suddenly hobbled in the door, cackling her glee, looking on as two mere mortals made fools of themselves.

The gods were aye for amusement.

Meddlesome Highland crones as well, it would seem.

"Use the cream, lass." He heard her open the jar. "It'll help the pain, for sure."

That, at least, was good.

Devorgilla was famed for stirring mischief and mayhem, but she wasn't known for harming folk.

Callum heard the rustling of cloth, knew the lass was unlacing her bodice ties, slipping her gown off her shoulders, down her back. But then she stopped.

Silence reigned.

"I can't reach the scratches," she said, five words that sent chills down his back.

"Try," he urged her, standing as rigid as stone. "You must."

More rustling, an annoyed huff. "I'm sorry. You'll have to do it for me."

Callum turned, relief sluicing him when he saw she clutched the opened front of her gown high, the lush rounds of her breasts hidden from view.

"Give me the jar," he said, grateful his voice was still his own. "Then turn so I can smear the cream on the scratches."

She did as he asked, letting the gown slip to her waist, freeing the whole of her back.

Callum's heart stopped.

He couldn't speak.

Nary a cat scratch marred her skin.

But...

Below her left shoulder, level with her heart, was a reddish-brown mark.

A vertical 'scar' she'd surely carried from birth and that exactly matched the two marks on his body. He carried one on his back in the same spot as hers, while the other was on his chest, right over his heart. And he knew without looking, what he'd see if she turned again, showing him her naked breasts.

"Alanna." His heart hammered so hard he heard its beating in his ears. "I must see the front of you. I'm no' asking because I want to pounce on you. Just let me see, please."

She didn't move. "No man has ever seen me naked."

No man but me, came the Norse voice again, this time at his ear as if the invisible fiend stood beside him, looking on as he stepped into this nightmare of truth.

And truth it had to be, much as he'd rather deny it.

Yet he'd heard the tales, the stories and legends – just as she had.

Their legend, their past.

Another chill raced through him and he hoped he didn't start to tremble. His heart and his mind-of-its-own maleness were beyond his control. The first pounding so hard he wondered Blackie and his friends didn't hear up in the longhouse; the second so tight and straining, he feared he'd soon disgrace himself.

"One quick look, lass, and I'll no' trouble you again." He took a deep breath, bracing himself for what he knew he'd see. "Turn around, your breasts bared to me."

"Oh, gods!" she cried, clapping her hands over her eyes.

"Turn now."

And she did.

Callum stepped back, needing a better view. Then he looked at her. As he'd known they'd be, her breasts were magnificent. High, full, and beautifully rounded. Valkyrie breasts, noble and proud, the crests rosy and thrusting, puckered by the night's cold air. But it wasn't the creamy lushness of her nakedness that stole his breath, almost bringing him to his knees.

It was the scar that matched his, the red-brown mark over her heart, placed level with the mark on her back – a terrible, yet wondrous truth that could not be denied.

The spear that slew the *Yuletide Lovers* – they bore the marks even now.

"Lady..." He paused, drew a breath. "Hear me well because I'll only say this once. And after I do, I'm going to remove my cloak and tunic and show you my chest and back.

"Then, after you've gazed upon my flesh as I have just looked on yours, well..." He took a deep breath, would've sworn the Rock-pool Cottage was spinning around them, the floor tilting and pitching, much like a ship caught in a whirlpool. Not wanting to think about what might happen next, he threw off his cloak, letting it fall to the pristine wood-planked floor.

Next, he shrugged out of his mailed tunic and let it drop as well. His under-tunic followed, and then he stood as half-naked as her, his arms held out to the sides so his chest was fully displayed.

To her credit, she watched him strip, not whirling around in maidenly shyness.

But she said nothing and it was then that he saw her gaze was fixed on the wall behind him. A spot just over his right shoulder. Clever lass, shielding her virtue.

“Look at me, Alanna.” He moved so the light from the driftwood fire would shine on his chest. “Now.”

And she did, her eyes widening. “Mercy!” She clapped a hand to her cheek. “Dinnae tell me you bear the same on your back, in the same place?”

He nodded, then turned, letting her see.

“Oh, gods!” She stared, began to tremble. “We carry the scars,” she cried, her eyes streaming. “That means...”

“There is Yuletide magic, after all,” Callum spoke for her, his own voice thick with wonder. “The lovers, Torrad the Fearless and Kadlin, are-”

“They are us.” She looked at him, her eyes round, one hand still pressed to her cheek.

“Or we are them.” Callum wasn’t sure how such things worked, wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

He did know why everything about her had bothered him so, from the first moment Ula, damn her eyes, had warned him of a fair-haired, blue-eyed Valkyrie with a stony heart.

It all made sense now.

And...

He was about to become the arse he’d been calling himself – with her agreement, of course.

“Lass...” He set his hands on her shoulders, looked into her tear-misted eyes. “There’s a good while before Blackie’s Yule feast. If we aren’t losing our minds, and I dinnae think that is so, it’s been nigh on a thousand years since we’ve kissed. I know you are a maid, and I’ll no’ touch-”

“I am one now.” She pushed her gown down over her hips, stepped out of it and then kicked it aside. “I do not believe Kadlin was chaste,” she said, lifting her chin. “Their enchanted trees are called the *Yuletide Lovers*, after all.”

“So they are,” Callum said, his hungry gaze flicking over her, his thousand year need more urgent than he would’ve believed.

She touched his cheek, lit a finger along his jaw. “We can assume Kadlin enjoyed their tumbles, that she was bold.”

“Likely so.” Callum began to smile, his manhood stretching, hardening even more. “She was surely a minx, perhaps insatiable.”

Alanna smiled. “Shall we find out?”

“I believe we should,” Callum agreed, sweeping her up into his arms, carrying her into the cottage’s sleeping area, letting its blue

curtain fall shut behind them.

As if all the gods in Asgard knew and approved, the cold northern winds quickened, howling a gale across Skerray and even the neighboring isles. Not to be outdone, the winter sea tossed and churned, its swells running high and fast, crashing to shore with echoing booms, keeping up the furor as long as needed.

The *Yuletide Lovers* deserved their privacy, after all.

And prideful as Nordic gods are, it wouldn't do for any mortal to hear them celebrating, or to see how misty-eyed they were, too, now that the long-lost lovers were reunited.

Sometimes goodness does prevail, especially at Yule.

Chapter 17

Blackie's longhouse

A Yuletide feast, one of many

A sennight later...

“Did ye enjoy my Yule gifts?”

Devorgilla of Doon sat at the festive high table and raised a mead horn as she peered at Callum and Alanna. As on Wind-Dancer, she'd added a horned helm to her all-black garb, though this night sprigs of holly and mistletoe dangled from the horns.

Callum didn't care to peek at her boots, sure red sparkles would burst from her red-plaid shoelaces.

A sight he'd seen often enough and didn't care to witness again.

As he'd thought at sea, the old gal was losing her touch – not that he'd complain, now that he and Alanna had found each other, and after so many years.

Gods be thanked.

But Devorgilla hadn't brought gifts to Blackie's Yule feast.

The gift was learning the truth of the *Yuletide Lovers*. As far as he was concerned, he was good for gifting for another thousand years and then some.

Alanna was all he wanted.

And as she'd shown him every night this past week, she felt the same.

She loved him, she'd vowed – in memory and now.

Nothing would ever part them again. He just wished he had a Yule gift for her, though he did have an idea...

He would have her stony heart set in silver, made into a necklace. A keepsake she could wear all her days. She didn't need to toss the fossilized wood into the fire for its magic to work.

They were the magic of the *Yuletide Lovers*.

And so he wanted to honor the two pines, thank them for their devotion.

“Are you not surprised she's here?” Alanna leaned in, spoke at

his ear. "I must admit I'm awed, having never met her till now."

Be glad, Callum almost said, but caught himself in time.

He did owe the great lady.

Especially for the woman he'd soon make his wife, Blackie having agreed to preside over the ceremony – a fine traditional one, carried out in the old ways of the Norse.

"You didn't answer me, laddie." Devorgilla was suddenly right beside him, in the spot where, a moment before, Grim was knocking back mead and slipping Gubbie bits of smoked herring and cod under the table.

"He's away to his lady wife, Breena," the crone declared, cackling. "Said he was missing her sorely at Yule and so I agreed to grant him a speedy journey back to her side."

Callum almost choked on his mead.

Alanna did, though Devorgilla wriggled a gnarly finger her way and the choking stopped.

"I have great powers," she boasted. "Nae man should doubt me, or the wonder of Yule."

"Oh, we know and are grateful." Alanna felt Gubbie rub against her ankles beneath the table, a sure sign Grim was indeed gone.

"Have you seen Blackie's fires?" The crone beamed at them, seeming excited. "His longhouse central fires. No' the Yuletide bonfires that'll blaze later. The ones in here are mighty fine. Go have a look."

Alanna and Callum exchanged glances, both aware that such suggestions should be met.

Leastways when given by the great lady herself.

And so they pushed back from the feasting table and made their way through the revelers, heading for the three fires that commanded the heart of Blackie's longhouse.

No one else was there.

Most everyone still enjoyed themselves at the well-laden long tables spread throughout the holly-and-mistletoe-draped feasting hall.

"The fires are warm, at least." Alanna leaned against Callum, glad when he drew her closer.

"Guidsakes!" Callum started. "Look, there in the glow of the flames..."

"Where?" Alanna frowned, seeing nothing.

"Beyond the fires, against the far wall." Callum spoke low, not

wanting anyone else to hear, or see.

Alanna followed his gaze, her jaw slipping when she saw the two tall Scots pines silhouetted darkly against the flickering light. Proud, beautiful trees, their trunks and limbs entwined, their crowns touching as well, as if they kissed.

Then the trees turned silver, shining so bright Callum and Alanna had to shield their eyes. But even as they stared, the trees were gone, vanishing as quickly as they'd appeared.

"Mercy." Alanna clapped a hand to her breast, then gasped. "Oh! What is this?"

Looking down, she saw a beautiful silver chain around her neck, a heart-shaped pendant resting against her heart. And, of course, there could be no doubt that the smooth stony heart framed so lovingly in silver was her own luck-piece from the *Yuletide Lovers*.

"By the gods." Callum stared at the necklace. "I was just thinking about having such a gift made for you. Later, after we return to Seacliffe."

"The crone," Alanna said, sure of it. "She knew and gave us another blessing."

"Then let us thank her." Callum took her hand, led her back to the high table.

Devorgilla was gone.

"She left." Callum looked at his love, saw her disappointment. "Dinnae fret. We will see her again. Perhaps she will visit us at Seacliffe?"

"Aye." Alanna didn't sound too sure. "When we are able to return. It could be a while."

"What is that?" Callum looked at a red-sealed scroll on the bench where Devorgilla had been sitting. "One last gift?"

Alanna reached for the scroll, touching it to be sure it was real. "It's a true missive," she said, handing it to him. "Open it."

And he did, scanning the royal script, his jaw slipping as he read. When he finished, he drew Alanna into a tight embrace.

"Tis over," he said. "Dunwhinnie has the soul who wanted to harm you, and Seacliffe, it would seem."

"What are you saying?" Alanna gripped his arm, her brow pleating. "Who?"

"My sorrow, lass." Callum put down the scroll. "'Twas your aunt," he said. "The King says she was in love with your father and was furious when he married her sister, your mother. In time, her

fury turned to madness, for even after she wed and bore a son, she took vengeance on every Grant she could, hoping to see your home and all in it ruined before she left this earth.”

“Aunt Nettie?” Alanna couldn’t believe it.

“Aye, without doubt,” Callum told her, wishing he could take her pain. “Your cousin Boyd alerted the Crown. He knew she was trysting with a neighboring chieftain, and though he didn’t mind, was even glad for his mother to have a man in her life...”

“It would seem it was her lover who loosened the hand-ropes on your home’s cliff-path. Boyd saw him.” He glanced at the missive, reading the scrawled lines and then trying to share them with as little hurt as possible.

“He started following the pair, overheard enough to learn the depth of their perfidy.” He lifted a hand, rubbed the back of his neck. “It was Boyd who wrote to Dunwhinnie. No’ your aunt as she boasted. Clearly, she didn’t know the true contents. That letter set everything in motion, is likely a reason we met as well.”

Alanna sighed, her heart hurting. “Poor Boyd. He must be crushed.”

“He surely is.” Callum glanced again at the scroll. “The King has offered him a post in his guard, a chance to leave the North and start a new life.”

“I hope he takes it,” Alanna agreed, sad that Yule could begin with such gladness and end in sorrow.

“Does Dunwhinnie say what will happen to my aunt?” A terrible thought came to her. “The King will not hang her, will he?”

“Nae, but she will no’ be happy where she’s going.” Callum couldn’t resist a smile. “Dunwhinnie offered a solution and the King and his Stewarts thought it fitting.”

“What?” Alanna didn’t miss the gleam in his eye. “How can you look amused?”

“Aye, well, ’tis just.” Callum took a mead jug from the table, poured them two horns, handing her one. “Dunwhinnie needs someone to look after his hundred cats or so. He and the King think your aunt deserves the position.”

“Oh, my!” Alanna gasped, then she, too, smiled. “You are right, she will not be pleased.”

“There’s more.” Callum took her arm, led her out of the longhouse and toward the beach where revelers were just starting to light the Yule bonfires.

"What?" Alanna hurried to keep pace with him, Gubbie taking off for the cottage.

"Just this..." Callum stopped a good bit behind the merrymakers, patted the royal scroll now tucked beneath his plaid. "The King sent a personal note to me, warning me to stop looking for my ancestors' hidden treasure in the sea caves beneath Draugar Hall.

"He said..." He paused, pulling her close to kiss her. "He said the tides are too dangerous for such folly. That you need me and he wishes me to devote my time to creating new treasure with you."

Alanna blinked. "What are you saying? What is he saying?"

"He means children, sweeting." He glanced up at the snow-clouded sky, then back to her. "He wants us to wed and raise a family, the greatest Yule gift we can have.

"And..." He smiled again. "He said seeing you happy would fulfill an old Yuletide promise one of his ancestors made to yours. Seems a g-g-g-great grandfather of yours rescued the favorite mistress of his g-g-g-great grandfather when her ship foundered off Seacliffe's coast in a winter storm. At the time, the then king promised to aye look after Grant ladies, ne'er letting harm come to them."

"So that's the reason." Alanna gave him a wobbly smile, a tear rolling down her cheek. "I never knew."

"Now you do." He grabbed her hand, kissed her cold fingertips. "I will take good care of you, lass."

"But do you love me? *Can* you love me?"

Callum laughed. "You have doubts? After all we have seen and been through?"

"We did just meet," she reminded him.

"True enough." He leaned in, this time kissing her cold, red nose. "We met now, reuniting after a thousand years or so."

This time Alanna laughed.

"Good, then." She took his hand, lacing their fingers. "We shall fill Seacliffe with many wee MacCullochs. How is that?"

"I could ask for no greater Yule gift, my love." He started toward the bonfires.

"Aye, you could." Alanna dug her heels into the sand, halting him. "I have my own Yuletide gift for you."

"Nae, lass." He shook his head, pressed two fingers to her lips. "I have more than enough."

"I told you once, Grant women can be fierce." She nipped round him, blocking his way to the fires. "Do you remember when we rode past Draugar's ruin? Did you see that I turned my head?"

"Aye, I saw."

"But you didn't know why, did you?"

"I thought you couldn't bear seeing such a shamble on Seacliffe land."

"Well, you erred. I looked away because of guilt. It hurt me to ride past there with you."

"But why?"

"Good enough reason, and one that I hope will make your heart soar." She blinked, dashed a tear off her cheek. "You see, Draugar was already falling when my father was young, but it wasn't in the ruinous state it is now."

"Of course, not, sweeting. Time and weather-"

"Nae, not that." She shook her head. "It was my father. Seacliffe needed repairs and he took the stones from Draugar to rebuild many of Seacliffe's walls."

"That means..." Her voice broke, tears rolling down her cheeks. "A good part of Draugar Hall lives on in my home. In *our* home, once we live there as one, raise our family there."

"You will be home again," she finished. "Leastways if you can see it that way?"

"Och, I can, lass, I can." Callum grabbed her, hoisting her in the air and whirling her round and round, his heart full. "Guidsakes, I love you!"

Then he released her, and whooped his joy, every soul on the beach hurraing with him.

Yule was good that night.

And somewhere faraway, a certain meddlesome crone hobbled out of her cottage and tossed her horned helm high in the air, hooting and cackling with him, her red plaid shoelaces glowing bright.

Epilogue

*Seacliffe Castle, the great hall
A Yuletide feast, one year later...*

"I told you we'd see her again." Callum tore his gaze off the tiny, black-garbed crone at the far end of the high table and smiled at his much-loved wife. "A man could think you'd trust my word after all these years."

"Shhh..." Alanna slipped a hand beneath the table covering, pinched his thigh. "The hall is full, and Highlanders have long ears. Some may not understand. All know we've been together a year this night, not years."

"Aye, well." Callum slid an arm around her, drawing her close. "If anyone heard and asks we'll just tell them the way of it. The truth is aye best."

"You weren't very truthful when you rode into this hall last Yule, snatching me away."

"You have me there." He leaned in, dropped a kiss on her brow. "So I'll tell you a truth now..." He sat back, gave her a wicked smile. "If you keep your fingers splayed across my thigh, you'll have even more reason to blush."

"Oh!" Alanna snatched back her hand. "So you're pleased the great Devorgilla is here?" she asked, changing the subject. "I thought you didn't like her?"

Callum waited as a serving lass refilled their mead horns. When she moved on, he took a long drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "She has every right to be here," he said, casting another glance down the table. "She helped bring us together, didn't she?"

"So you do like her?"

"Aye," Callum admitted, watching the crone cackle at something Alanna's cousin Boyd was saying. "She may have brought Boyd and his new wife together, too." He turned back to Alanna. "Why else would such a wee, delicate lassie want a big, ugly brute like your

cousin?"

"Boyd has a good heart," Alanna reminded him. "He had a role in our happiness, too."

"So he did." Callum's smile returned. "More than you ken."

"Oh?"

"At least Devorgilla didn't wear her horned helm this year," he deflected, wanting to draw out his Yuletide surprise. "Her garland of dried seaweed suits her better, eh? And the mussel shells she worked into it. A fine touch."

"What did you mean about Boyd?" Alanna lifted her voice above the shouts and laughter of the guisers, a local group this Yule, and just bursting into the hall. "You said he helped us more than I know."

"Did I?" Callum stood, waved his mead horn in salute to the guisers as they leapt and twirled past the high table. "Hail, Thor and Odin!" he roared, grinning round. "Merry Yuletide!"

Beside him, Alanna also pushed to her feet. "You might not find the night so merry if Kadlin comes to call," she warned, her smile tight. "Her Viking blood is heating, so have a care."

"You're keeping something from me," she finished, gripping his arm. "Have done, and tell me."

Callum broke free, then pulled her close for a swift, hard kiss - much to the amusement of those around them. "So, my wife!" he said, releasing her. "Tell Kadlin she's more than welcome to share her heated blood later this eve, when we seek our bed," he added, speaking low as he grabbed her wrist and led her from the hall. "For now, you're coming with me to the Old Tower."

She laughed, sounding indeed like a fearless Viking maid. "You're kidnapping me again?"

"Nae." He flashed a look at her as they neared an ancient stair tower, lit by a few bracketed torches and moonlight. "I have a surprise for you in the tower's topmost chamber," he told her, already pulling her up the winding stone steps. "A Yuletide gift."

Alanna stopped, frowned at him. "We agreed no gifts."

"I lied."

"I am beginning to wonder about you," she said, then laughed again when he swept her up in his arms, holding her close to his chest as he kept on up the stairs.

"You'll no' mind the wee untruth when you see your surprise."

"A friend for Gubbie?" Alanna glanced behind them, knew her

beloved cat would be trailing them.

And, of course, he was.

“Nae,” Callum said, tossing Gubbie a smile. “Though he may soon have a new favorite place to nap.”

“Say you.” Alanna shook her head. “No one visits the Old Tower. It’s been empty for centuries.”

“Aye, well.” Callum reached the top landing, lowered her to the warped, wood-planked floor. “Could be a certain crone and your cousin have been here a time or two in recent months,” he owned, opening the room’s door. “Go in, my heart.”

And Alanna did, her immediate cry worth all the trouble it took to create such a haven for her.

For them.

“Mercy!” she cried again, swiping at her eyes. “I never would have dreamed...”

“That was the idea, sweeting.” Callum stepped up behind her, sliding his arms tightly around her as they both admired the artwork of King Robert’s favorite painter. The masterwork he’d crafted to frame one of the chamber’s tall and narrow windows...

As at Blackie’s longhouse Yule celebration, two tall Scots pines rose in silhouette against the ancient stone wall. But these trees were painted, one on each side of the lancet window. Proud, beautiful trees, their trunks and limbs entwined across the window’s stone tracery, their crowns touching at the window’s high and arching top. They could have been living, breathing trees, as was surely the artist’s intent.

They were the *Yuletide Lovers*.

A new stone bench stood before them, set a few paces away, giving a pleasing view to whoever wished to sit and admire them. At the moment that was Gubbie, for someone had thoughtfully placed a folded plaid on bench, and he’d quickly claimed the spot, curling into a plump, contented ball, so giving his mistress and her husband a bit of privacy as well.

“You are pleased?” Callum hoped her silence was caused by a thick throat. Emotion, and not disappointment staying her voice.

“I am-” she broke off, her voice hitching as she gulped back a sob, her eyes streaming again.

“I take that as an aye,” Callum spoke for her, his own eyes misting.

She gulped again, then nodded.

“How did-” she broke off again, pressed a hand to her heart. “Tell me...”

“Ah, well.” Callum stepped round to stand beside her, slid his arm across her shoulders. “I told you Devorgilla and Boyd were here a time or two? I met her up on the moors one day and she asked how we were doing. I told her of my wish to have the *Yuletide Lovers* painted up here. That I wanted to give them new life if only in our hearts. My plan was to paint them myself, but she cackled a storm when I said so, and suggested Boyd bring the King’s master painter to Seacliffe.

“To be sure, I didn’t argue.” He lifted a hand, smoothed the tears off her cheeks. “When she came to see the finished work, she suggested a sitting bench.”

“Why did I never see her?” Alanna peered at him, her sweet brow pleating. “I didn’t see any of them.”

Callum shrugged. “They aye came when you were off to visit fishing or farming folk somewhere. How they knew to arrive on just such days, I dinnae ken.”

Alanna shook her head. “To be sure, we know,” she said, smiling. “Devorgilla.”

“Like as no,” Callum agreed. “She does know everything.”

“Since all time beginning, aye.”

Alanna went to the trees then, lightly traced their graceful branches. “How can we ever thank her?”

“The gods only know.” Callum spoke true. “I do believe she just enjoys looking out for some souls. There’s more, too. She-”

“More?”

“Aye.” Callum joined her at the window. “When she suggested a bench, she told me there was a fine source of stone down in the undercroft. A false-”

“The false well,” Alanna rushed in, nodding. “One of my ancestors dug it, thinking to have a fresh water source inside the keep, but the well was dry. He dug another one, a good well, in one of the lower storerooms, then had the false well filled so no one would fall in and get hurt, or worse.”

“So Devorgilla said,” Callum remembered. “Boyd and I took turns climbing down the shaft and so brought up enough stones to make the bench.” He glanced again at the painted trees. “Neither of us can create such beauty, but we made the bench.”

Alanna’s smile lit the room. “That makes it all the more

precious.”

“Precious, indeed,” Callum said, readying himself to share the rest. “Thon old well holds more than stones.”

Alanna blanched. “Dinnae tell me you found bones?”

“Nae, nothing the like.” Callum pulled her into his arms, needing her close. “My family’s treasure is down there.”

“What?” Alanna stared at him, her eyes rounding. “How can that be? Did one of my ancestors steal it?”

“Could be,” Callum spoke true. “But I suspect it was there all along. As Boyd explained, that part of the undercroft is directly above some of the deepest caves along the coast. Perhaps the digging of the well disturbed the treasure’s hiding place and, over time, the rocks shifted, chests broke open, tides swept in, and so bits of the hoard washed into the old well shaft.

“It’s all Viking goods,” he told her. “Coins from Saracen lands, silver and gold armbands and brooches, rings, a Thor’s hammer. No’ much, but the rest is surely there, deeper in the shaft.”

“By the gods.” Alanna pressed a trembly hand to his cheek, blinked back fresh tears. “Then you’ve recovered your family’s lost wealth at last.”

Callum nodded. “So it seems.”

“We’ll ask Boyd to stay a while, help you bring it all up.” Alanna brightened, began pacing. “You can then repair-”

“He’s already agreed to stay,” Callum cut in. “But I’m no’ touching the treasure, sweeting. No’ even to restore Draugar. Boyd and I will retrieve whate’er we can find and then we’ll hide it in a more secure place in the undercroft. For safekeeping.”

“That’s wise.” Alanna nodded. “But Draugar Hall-”

“Draugar is aye with us, lass. That ye ken, for you told me yourself.” Callum smoothed his knuckles down her cheek. “We’ll keep the treasure safe. That is all. It willnae be for us to spend, save for emergencies. That’ll aye be so, and Boyd agrees.”

“To what?”

“That Seacliffe’s keeper will aye know of the castle’s wealth, and where it can be found. Nae other souls, save closest, most trusted kin.”

“Ahhh...” Alanna hooked her arms around his neck, rested her head on his shoulder. “You’re thinking of your family.”

“I am thinking of the past, aye,” he said. *The distant past*, his heart added.

Her face said she understood, and so he captured her wrists, bringing her hands round and kissing each of her fingertips.

“The past,” he said again, “and the future. Our children to come, and all those after them. A family secret, for times of need.”

“Oh, Callum.” Her beautiful blue eyes shone again, more tears spilling free. “I always knew you weren’t a true pirate,” she said, her smile wobbling. “You are the most noble of men.”

“Nae, lass,” he corrected, “I am simply your man. The husband who loves you.”

“And I am the woman who has always loved you,” she added, her voice carrying a distinct Nordic flair. “Dinnae you e’er forget it.”

“Nae worries, sweeting, I willnae,” he promised. “No’ in a thousand more years.”

That truth spoken, he swept her up in his arms again and carried her from the tower chamber, Gubbie once more trailing behind. Guests waited below, the most raucous hours of the Yule feast yet before them.

And as they made their way down the spiral steps, the painted trees shimmered and embraced as if caught in a magical wind. For a moment, they turned the brightest silver, sparkles whirling everywhere, even through the windows and out across the cold, night sea.

The *Yuletide Lovers* were reunited, safe and happy at last.

And all across the land, those who believed the legend, might have heard a heartfelt, silvery sigh.

Did you Know

Reviews are worth gold to authors – these days more than ever. When readers share their thoughts on a book, other readers listen. There's no better way to spread word about stories you love. A win-win for readers and the authors you love.

If you enjoyed *A Yuletide Promise*, I would be really appreciative if you would review the book online – Amazon, BookBub, and Goodreads are the best options. A review needn't be long. Something as simple as 'I really loved this story' is great.

My heartfelt thanks.

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

Thank you so much for reading *A Yuletide Promise*. Holiday stories are a pleasure to write because the magic of the season slips into the ink. It's easy to leave cares behind and enter a world where curling up before a crackling fire, a dog or cat on your lap, and a cold wind whistling round the eaves can seem so real, the daily working hours become an escape. It is my hope that your time spent in these pages gave you a welcome respite from the stress that too often accompanies modern-day holidays.

If you read the dedication, you'll know this story is very close to my heart. So before you close the book, I hope you'll enjoy the following peeks between the lines of *A Yuletide Promise*...

Christmas of Yore ~ Long-time readers know to expect Highland magic in my books. My beloved character, Devorgilla of Doon, makes an appearance and wields her special brand of magic in this story, as she does in most of my books. In this one, the emphasis is on Yule and Midwinter rather than a more traditional Christmas. That is not just a personal choice, but also because Yule and Winter Solstice were still of great significance in medieval Scotland.

Merrymaking blended old (pagan) and new (Christian) traditions. For those reasons, I allowed my characters to enjoy a variety of holiday customs...

Guisers ~ These roaming merrymakers existed and went under a variety of names, depending on era and region. Animal skins, bones, and skulls, along with noisemaking rattles, were the most common disguises and their purpose as they roamed the countryside was to spread good cheer. Kidnappings and pranks were common, and all in good fun. Real guisers would have been even more outlandishly costumed, their behavior more wild, than the ones in my story.

Curious readers can Google *Krampus*. They're about as close to

the guisers in this story as it gets. In the decades I lived in Germany, seeing Yuletide Krampus in cold and snowy Alpine villages was a highlight of the season. Isn't it wonderful that such tradition still exists?

Bonfires ~ A good wintry blaze is a tradition as old as time, really, and written with strong Viking influences in *A Yuletide Promise*. Thor was the Norse god honored in this way and his sacred oak was the tree of choice for Yuletide fires. I used driftwood for the bonfires on the fictitious Isle of Skerry because it would have been easier at hand than Thor's beloved oak. Fires were lit in the belief that their flames would create sympathetic magic, encouraging the return of the sun to a landscape of cold winter darkness.

Yuletide ale & bannocks, seaweed decoration ~ Lady Alanna makes a Yuletide offering of ale and bannocks to the sea. This was a common practice among folk who lived along the coast. The idea was to thank the sea gods, hoping for good fishing throughout the coming year, and the health and safety of seafaring men. Likewise, the use of dried seaweed (sea tangle) as holiday decoration was thought to honor the sea and show thankfulness for its bounty.

King Robert ~ To avoid confusion, the Scottish king in this story is King Robert III, not Scotland's hero king, Robert the Bruce. Robert III is the famous Bruce's great-grandson. Born John Stewart, Earl of Carrick, he took on the name Robert when he became King in 1390. This was done to avoid association with the ill-fated John Balliol who reigned as Scotland's king for four brief years. Even so, Robert III struggled as King, his rule fraught, and he died an unhappy man.

Pirates and the Skerries ~ Clusters of islands often served as havens for pirates in medieval Scotland. When this story appeared in my heart and mind, I remembered seeing just such empty, rockbound isles while taking ferry trips to Scotland's Northern Isles. Skerry is the Scottish word for reef and/or rocky island, hence *the Skerries*, fictitious islands I imagined about halfway between northern Scotland and Orkney.

Skerry, the main island, is home to broken men – unfortunate souls who have lost everything and then regained a home and self-

worth by joining Blackie Bain on Skerry. These men give back to society by now and then aiding the greater good through less-than-savory tasks for the Scottish nobility and Crown.

Vikings ~ As with Highland magic, long-time readers probably aren't surprised to find Vikings in *A Yuletide Promise*. They appear in many of my books. And rightly so, because...

Vikings are all over Scottish history.

The Norse ruled the Hebrides for nearly four centuries. Some historians place the earliest invasions as far back as 100 B.C. But the great age of Viking raids didn't happen until many hundreds of years later. When it came, beginning in the late 700s, the attacks were vicious and terrifying.

But Vikings weren't just blood-thirsty sea-raiders.

They were also farmers, fishermen, shipbuilders, craftsmen, and incredibly far-traveling traders, merchants, and explorers. Like so many people who raid, they eventually became settlers, bringing their own history, culture, and beliefs to the lands they'd once ravaged. Through intermarriage with locals, they also brought new and fresh blood.

Norse hold on the Hebrides began to crumble after the Battle of Largs in 1264. The actual battle wasn't a grand victory for the Scots, but the weather gods joined the fray and fierce sea storms smashed the Norse longships. King Hakon retreated to Orkney where he died and Norway ceded the Hebrides to Scotland two years later, in 1266.

Scotland's Northern Isles remained under Norse rule much longer. Only in the late 1460s did Scotland gain power there.

To this day, Viking influence remains strong. Scotland brims with Norse archaeological sites. Viking influence can be found in place names, local customs and festivals, and myth and legend.

Kadlin/Lady Alanna ~ She is unashamed of her passion. Norsewomen enjoyed sexual freedom unheard of in other societies. A woman could divorce a husband if he didn't adequately satisfy her. Some wives who are recorded as having made use of this right are also noted as walking away with their dowries returned to them. I like to think they were also as generous, good, and big-hearted as they were free-spirited.

Horned helmets ~ Worn by the guisers and Devorgilla. These helmets were part of the guiser-ly fun. Vikings didn't wear horned helmets. A Viking warrior's head protection of choice was most often a simple pointed helmet with a nasal bar. These helmets sometimes had mail 'curtains' at the back to safeguard the neck.

Grim ~ Like Devorgilla, Grim finds his way into a lot of my books. If you'd like to meet him again, and even see him as the hero of his own holiday tale, see below for a peek at his story, *Once Upon a Highland Christmas*. mybook.to/HighlandChristmas

The Yuletide Lovers ~ As noted in the dedication, this story was inspired by two beautiful cedar trees. I loved them dearly and they greeted me every morning as they stood very near to my home. One even had a naturally-formed heart high on its noble trunk. They were not my property, but I would not have been able to save them anyway as they were felled by a local council decision. They were healthy and home to many lovely birds, squirrels, and other wildlife. They also offered shade, always so welcome in Florida. Their loss hit me hard and I cried the entire day as they were felled. My heart remained heavy, hurting much longer. Yes, I am a soppy and sentimental tree-hugger, and an animal lover. The legend of the *Yuletide Lovers* was/is my way of keeping their memory alive.

Gubbie ~ As noted in the Note to Readers, Gubbie was inspired by a huge gray, green-eyed senior cat who turned up on my doorstep many years ago. He was a stray, but so docile and affectionate. I learned why when I took him to the vet. He wasn't chipped, but he was neutered and declawed. His ear also wasn't cut. I can only think he went missing and/or someone abandoned him. All attempts to find his owner failed, and so he became mine. He was probably the most dear, sweet, and loving cat I ever had. I called him Goodie because he was, well, so good. When Lady Alanna needed a cat, Goodie became Gubbie.

Thank you for taking the time to read my thoughts about *A Yuletide Promise*. From my corner of the world to yours, Happy Yule!

Wishing you Highland Magic!

Sue-Ellen Welfonder
(aka Allie Mackay)



* * *

Want to see Grim again?

You can, and in his very own holiday tale, *Once Upon a Highland Christmas*. mybook.to/HighlandChristmas
But he first appears in *Temptation of a Highland Scoundrel*, book 2
of my Highland Warriors Series...

Sins of a Highland Devil
Temptation of a Highland Scoundrel
Seduction of a Highland Warrior
Once Upon a Highland Christmas (holiday novella)
A Yuletide Promise (holiday novella)



* * *

Sneak Peek at Grim!

Once Upon a Highland Christmas

Sneak Peek - Once Upon a Highland Christmas

In a Magical Season...

Breena O' Doherty has lost everything. Now her only wish for Christmas is to brighten the holidays at her new Highland home, Duncreag Castle, where the MacNab laird is determined not to celebrate. Hoping to bring joy to the clan she dearly loves, she's stunned to see her efforts thwarted by the rugged Highlander who secretly holds her heart.

Love is the Greatest Gift of All...

Grim Mackintosh, Duncreag's captain of the guard, knows he isn't a man to stir female hearts. But he's stunned when Breena believes he's been stealing her festive decorations. Having admired her from afar, he seizes an unexpected chance to kiss her beneath the mistletoe. His boldness spurs a quest to bring Christmas cheer to Duncreag. Together, they travel across the snow-clad hills where passion soon blazes between them. But more than holiday magic is afoot in the Highlands. Can their love survive a shocking threat from the past? Or will the wonder of the season give them the happily-ever-after they deserve?



* * *

Once Upon a Highland Christmas Reviews

Night Owl TOP PICK Review
5 Stars

“Full of romance and sexy Highlanders. Magical.” ~ Night Owl
Reviews

“Written with Welfonder’s usual finesse and love of Scottish lore.”
~ My Book Addiction and More

“Beautiful sensual chemistry, tenderness and passion - I could feel
the surroundings.” ~ Nicole Laverdure, Goodreads

Enjoy this sneak peek at Grim’s story...

Once Upon a Highland Christmas
Highland Warriors Series

The Last Yuletide

In the hills and glens of Scotland's most rugged bounds, the clans brightened winter darkness with blazing log fires, well-flaming torches, and the golden glow of fine wax candles. Proud Highlanders would tell you that this was the most glorious corner of the world and that fierce, wild weather only made it better. To be sure, they knew how to live with the cold, and how to make merry.

Christmas was a joyous occasion.

The frosty nights provided a reason for kith and kin to gather in crowded great halls where festive lights and noisy revels welcomed one and all. Honeyed mead and hot spiced ale warmed gullets and spirits alike. And the feasting was a sight to behold, each holly-draped table decked with scrumptious fare, every delicacy imaginable.

Times were good and folk made merry.

Pipe and fiddle music filled halls lavishly decorated with evergreen. In some castles, lovely ladies strummed harps. Everywhere in these rugged bounds, men and women danced and sang beneath boughs of ivy and mistletoe. And always, bards stood before hearthsides, spinning wondrous tales. All ages enjoyed the gaiety.

Outside, the nights were cold and crisp, snow gently falling.

The beauty of such bright moonlit landscapes put tears in the eyes of the hardest men.

Women were too busy for such sentiment. But despite the bustle and toil, they smiled and laughed, their faces shining and their hearts full.

For the joy of the season was bountiful, and shared by everyone.

So it was sad when Yule fell out of favor with a clan famed for its celebrations.

MacNabs, they were.

And their home was Duncreag, a jewel among castles. Splendid and remote, the stronghold perched high atop jagged peaks and was ever crowned with a wreath of mist. Lofty and proud, Duncreag was well-loved by Clan MacNab and always drew awe from visitors.

Folk came often in those days as the MacNabs were known for their storytelling and song. How gladly they shared a roaring fire and plentiful victuals and ale. Indeed, their larder and cellar were bottomless, aye bursting with enough feast goods to entertain an endless stream of guests.

The MacNabs' openhanded generosity earned them many

friends. And even their enemies grudgingly admitted no clan hosted a grander feast.

Yet those who soar are prone to crashing.

When the fall came, Clan MacNab suffered a mighty blow. Some say they spiraled clear down to hell's deepest pit. Hardship and ill-fortune hammered them with a vengeance. As if such troubles weren't enough, a band of rogue warriors launched a vicious attack on Duncreag. Their leader, Ralla the Victorious, so named because he'd never lost a fight, wanted the stronghold as his own. And all because of the treasure he believed was hidden within Duncreag's walls. The castle fell easily, but the hoard of gold was never found. Ralla's fury was terrible and brought the loss of many MacNab loved ones. The clan's sorrows mounted, their grief untold. Darkness descended and shadows lengthened until the clan's gaiety was no more.

Instead of laughter, music, and song, a sad stillness cloaked the castle.

And so as days and months passed, and then a full year, it came as no surprise when it became known that Duncreag's famed Yuletide revels weren't to be held.

Most folk were sympathetic. But some voiced disapproval. Either way, those who said anything, did so in whispers.

That was because, regardless of opinion, everyone knew why Archibald, the aging MacNab chieftain, took such drastic measures.

And it was beneath Highland dignity to rub salt into his wounds.

No one knew how to heal them either, so folk stayed away.

Archie was left to stew in gloom as the winter nights drew in and cold, north winds rose to howl around Duncreag's towers. The snow also deepened and the brittle air chilled everyone to the bone. Of Yule, there was no sign whatsoever, not even a sprig of holly.

Man and beast skulked about, silent as possible, for no one wished to break the brooding laird's peace.

Nor did anyone want to risk his wrath.

Only two souls dared...

A battle-hardened warrior who believed in love for everyone except himself and the spirited lass determined to change his mind.

For the good of all, it came to pass that they set out to prove Duncreag and its cantankerous, unwilling laird deserved a festive season.

That's when their trouble begins.

Grim, the fierce Highland warrior, might not believe in tender feelings, but he's never tangled with a bold and beautiful lass like Breena, a one-time Irish slave girl. And Breena isn't above using all her wiles to win the heart of the man who already holds hers.

Yet as they surrender to passion and even Grim begins to suspect he's fallen in love, an unexpected threat rises from the past.

And it's powerful enough to tear them apart and ruin Duncreag's Christmases forevermore.

Chapter One

*The Great Hall at Duncreag Castle
Scottish Highlands
Winter 1398*

The Christmas thief was the wrong man.

Breena O' Doherty was too stunned to blink as she stared across the night-darkened hall at the surprising culprit. The hour might be late, but sleep hadn't dulled her wits. Besides, there could be no mistaking Grim Mackintosh, Duncreag's captain of the guards. Huge and powerfully built, he stood head and shoulders over other men.

Even through the shadows, she recognized him.

Until this moment, she'd secretly admired and even desired him, though it wasn't her place. As a village lass from Ireland, unable to claim noble birth, she was only here at Duncreag because Ralla the Victorious and his band of raiders had captured her and brought her with them to Scotland.

If Grim hadn't ridden from a neighboring glen to oust the invaders, the gods only knew what might have come of her. That Archie MacNab had allowed her to stay on at his castle would never have happened if Grim and his men hadn't rid Duncreag of the marauders. Her own home in Ireland had been destroyed, the village burned and all inhabitants slain. She wouldn't have had anywhere to go.

So she'd always looked on Grim kindly. Until this moment.

Now, Grim only shocked her. That he was guilty of ridding Duncreag of its already meager holiday decorations was clear. Any fool could see the long strand of beribboned ivy trailing from his belt. But only she knew the ivy had been part of the high table's centerpiece.

She knew that because she'd placed it there that morning.

Christmas was only days away. Brightening the hall and slipping little bits of cheer throughout the castle mattered to her. It was a season of hope and miracles, after all. She missed the festive

celebrations she'd enjoyed in Ireland. She'd seen how Yuletide wonders could happen, lifting spirits and healing hearts.

Duncreag needed Christmas.

Truth be told, so did she. And so she frowned at the now-empty high table. The beribboned ivy should be there still. It would be if not for the man across the hall.

He just wasn't who she'd expected.

She'd been sure Archie MacNab was responsible.

The old laird had been her prime suspect. She could see him sneaking into the hall at night, gathering the bits of cheer she took such care to set upon tables or drape on the walls. Then she'd imagined him slipping out again, his arms laden and his feet silent as he absconded with her holly and ivy, and even the white-berried balls of mistletoe.

Archie hadn't smiled once since the start of the festive season.

He'd even vowed there'd be no celebration at Duncreag.

Now...

Breena bit her lip, her brow pleating as she watched Grim. Disappointment welled inside her and her breath caught, trapped in her lungs.

Not wanting to believe her eyes, she leaned closer to the wall hanging she was hiding behind. She narrowed her gaze to see better, peered harder through the tiny rip in the tapestry. Only a few torches were lit and the hearth fire was nearly gone, the peat and wood ash giving off little more than a ruddy glow.

A fine haze of smoke hung in the air and the shadows were deep. Gloom filled the cold, empty hall and the darkness was thick, lending a cloak of stealth to anyone desiring to remain unseen.

A man, it would seem, like Grim Mackintosh.

The big Highland warrior knelt beside the *Cailleach Nollaigh*, a large chunk of wood cut from an oak tree and fondly called the Old Christmas Wife because it'd been carved to resemble a crone. Some folk preferred the term Yule log.

Either way, it represented the cold and dark of winter. The log was tossed onto the Christmas Eve fire so that its burning would triumph over the bleakness. As soon as the flames danced, bright golden light filled the hall and warmth spread hope and cheer. Candles were lit at the hearth and carried in a procession to grace each table. Voices were raised in song, joyous and grateful. It was an ancient and well-loved practice to bring good fortune to the clan

and castle in the coming year.

Few holiday traditions were more sacred.

Grim didn't seem to care.

Breana stood frozen behind the tapestry, unable to move as he bent over the log, glowering at the oaken crone visage as if he hadn't carved her himself only the day before. He'd been pleased when he'd finished, brushing his hands in obvious satisfaction and declaring the old woman's image as near to life as he could make her.

True, Archie should have done the handiwork.

Such was aye a chieftain's honor.

But the old laird had spirited himself away, pretending he wasn't aware that Grim and others had carried a huge stump of finest oak into his hall. Grim had no choice but to carve the *Cailleach Nollaigh*.

And hadn't everyone praised his skill?

Yet now he glared as if the Old Christmas Wife had sprouted horns.

Breana also frowned, but for entirely different reasons.

As captain of Duncreag's garrison, Grim was wearing a mail shirt, and the steely links gleamed like stars in the hall's dim light. Worse, their sheen drew attention to the broad set of his powerful shoulders. A huge, well-muscled brute of a man, he also had an endearing air of being slightly mussed despite his fierce reputation and tough, roughened edge. Just now, Breana noted his knack for looking slightly crumpled more than ever, for the soft glow of the dying fire glinted in his thick, dark hair, revealing that he must've recently stood in the wind, or shoved a hand through the strands, bringing disorder to his unbound, shoulder-length mane.

Breana bit her lip harder, annoyed that even now, knowing he was the Christmas thief, just looking at him across the darkened hall set off a flurry of excited stirrings deep in the lowest part of her belly.

Grim always did that to her, much as she knew such feelings weren't wise.

The big warrior wasn't just too far above her in station.

He scarce noticed her.

She never tired of looking at him, though, often standing in the shadows of a door arch or the lee of a wall, to watch him train Duncreag's younger lads how to fight. Grim was a master at

swordcraft, making it look so easy to swing a blade. Above all, he was a sight to behold when he wielded his huge Norse war ax, a weapon he usually wore strapped across his back. Breena shivered each time she saw him practice with the ax, its bright head slicing the air in a whirl of arcing silver as if bolts of lightning raced down from the heavens to leap from his fingers.

Yet she'd seen those same fingers rub the ears of the castle dogs. Or give the oldest amongst them the best beefy tidbits, because—as he once told her—the aged beasts had aching hips and wobbly legs. Some had milky eyes and couldn't see properly. So they couldn't compete with the stronger, younger whelps as they leaped to the fore, clamoring for the choicest treats.

Grim made sure the elder beasts feasted as was their due.

He had a heart for animals.

And he'd captured Breena's heart...

She even thought his beard rings were wildly masculine. Delicious chills swept her each time she remembered how he'd told her the silver rings he wore braided into his beard were fashioned by his own hand of steel from the swords of slain enemies.

That he honored the fiercest and bravest of such foes by making the rings from their weapons.

So, he'd assured her, their proud spirits never died. Their souls lived on to meet him in comradely kinship when he later joined them in the Otherworld.

How could she have been so wrong about him?

Silently vowing to never make such a mistake again, she leaned closer into the back of the wall hanging and pressed one eye to the spy slit. To her horror, a dirk now glittered in Grim's hand. She watched as he raised the blade above the *Cailleach Nollaigh*, clearly bent on gouging into the hallowed wood, ruining the hag's features.

Breena couldn't believe his wickedness.

Or that the tapestry's dust and a loose thread tickled her nose so mightily that she sneezed.

Mortified, she clapped a hand to her lips.

Across the hall, Grim stood, shoving his dirk back beneath his belt as he did so.

He turned her way, his unusual smoke-gray eyes honing in on the tapestry. Breena's breath caught at the determination in his gaze. She'd always found his eyes compelling, his lashes exceptionally thick. His dark hair swung loose about his shoulders,

the strands gleaming in the dim torchlight.

His beard rings also glinted, and the silver Thor's hammer at his throat.

Grim was pagan.

And just now he looked earthy and bold enough to eat her alive.

Her heart hammering wildly, Breena flattened herself against the cold stone of the wall. Grim started forward, his strides slow, sure, and bringing him ever closer.

"Dinnae think I cannae see you, lassie." His voice was rich and smooth, deeply burred and lowered intimately enough to send heat to her face.

She refused to think about what it did to other places.

Nor was there time for any such foolish contemplation, for he was almost upon her.

She could hear his steady, measured footsteps approaching.

Much more disturbing, she caught a hint of his manly scent of musk and leather, crisp, cold air, and just a trace of peat smoke, the whole made more intoxicating by a distinct dash of sandalwood and some exceptionally pleasing spice she couldn't identify.

No man smelled as good.

Nor had any other ever made her pulse race so crazily. She was hot all over now, her entire body aflame. And that although inside, she felt so chilled by his betrayal. She was in a terrible state, confused, infuriated, disillusioned, and wildly excited, at once.

She didn't like it.

She was also sure she could feel his stare through the woven thickness of the tapestry, as if his intensity pierced the cloth, pinning her in place, searing her straight to the roots of her soul.

Then he was right in front of her.

"I can see your slippers." His words only proved what she knew. "If you're after spying on a man, Breena, be certain all of you is hidden. Wall hangings that end above the floor give a fine view of feet and ankles. Next time—"

"There won't be one, for I've seen enough." Breena nipped out from behind the tapestry to glare at him. For good measure, she set her hands on her hips and tossed her head. "Though I'm surprised you know my name."

"I know much about you." He didn't seem fazed by her anger. He also reached to lift a curl of her hair, rubbing it between his fingers. "I also ken that maids with tresses like flame have tempers

and often act before they think.”

“I have reason to be wroth.” Breena snatched the beribboned ivy from beneath his belt and thrust it at him, accusingly. “You’re removing my decorations and”—she flashed a look across the hall at the Yule log—“you were about to defile the Old Christmas Wife.”

“Was I, now?” He cocked a brow.

“You were.” Breena looped the strand of ivy around her own belt. “You can’t deny it. I saw you.”

“You observed me doing something, aye.” He angled his head, his beard rings clacking with the movement. “Do you aye believe what you see? Have you no’ learned that all isn’t as it seems in this world?”

“I know someone is ridding the hall of every bit of greenery I set about.” She narrowed her eyes, hoping to make him feel guilty. “I’m not the only one to notice. The poor kitchen laddies fear a bogle is responsible. Heaven knows Duncreag has seen enough tragedy in recent years for a whole army of ghosts to float about its walls.”

“No spirit is stealing your Yuletide frippery, Lady Breena.” He regarded her in a way that made her want to squirm, and not because of the nature of their conversation. “Think you I am no’ troubled by the actions of a sad-hearted old man?”

Breena blinked, his admission surprising her. “You believe Archie is doing it?”

“Who else?”

“You’re the one who had my ivy dangling from your belt.”

“That proves the ivy was in my possession, no more.” A slow smile started at the corner of his mouth and spread until it was highly distracting. “I found the ivy in the passageway.” He glanced over his shoulder at the hall’s darkened entry arch. “I meant to return it to the high table.”

“When, after you damaged the Old Christmas Wife?” Breena’s chin came up. She wanted to believe him, but she’d caught him in the act. “I saw the dirk in your hand, the look on your face. You were furious.”

“So I was.” He set his hands on her hips, his grip firm as if he worried she’d bolt if he didn’t keep her before him. “But no’ because some crazed fury had me wanting to ruin the crone I’d spent hours working on, aiming to make her as lifelike as I could.”

“She was perfect.”

“So I thought.”

Breena was keenly aware of his big strong hands at her waist, his splayed fingers and how their warmth reached her despite the cloth of her gown. His touch felt good, even thrilling. So much so that delicious shivers rippled through her. She had to struggle against sighing with pleasure. But he wasn't holding her because he desired her. She knew why he was in the hall and why he didn't want her watching him. There was nothing wrong with her eyesight.

He had been about to defile the *Cailleach Nollaigh*.

She knew what she'd seen.

So she kept her chin raised, not hiding her suspicion. "If you were so pleased with the carving, why were you about to ruin her?"

"You think that was my intent?" Disappointment flickered across his face.

Breena hesitated.

He leaned in, so close that his lips brushed her ear. "I told you no' all is as it seems. Mayhap that is different in your Ireland. But I have been there, lass, and dinnae believe that is so."

"I thought we were speaking of the Yule log." Breena pulled back, not wanting to talk of her home. Inishowen, Donegal, all of Ireland was gone to her. She could never return, for nothing of her village remained. Her family was lost, her parents and even her much-loved aunt and uncle, all dead.

She'd only been spared because Ralla and his men wanted to sell her as a slave. They'd planned to do so after they'd settled into Duncreag.

Now they were gone, too, praise the gods.

And she was here.

Alone with Grim in Duncreag's great hall, and much too aware of the way his breath teased her skin. How his soft, husky voice flowed through her, making her uncomfortable.

Any moment he'd notice the blush heating her cheeks, guess how attracted she was to him. And that was to be avoided at all costs.

She had her pride.

She didn't wish to go moony-eyed over a man who scarce knew she existed.

Wasn't his face all stony again? The gray gaze he held so steady on her as unreadable as the steel links of his gleaming mail shirt?

"My home is no more and it pains me to think of it. I miss

Ireland, see you?" She spoke quickly, not caring if he heard the regret in her voice. "I would know why you were—"

"At the *Cailleach Nollaigh*, aye? And"—his eyes warmed a bit then, a faint smile curving his lips—"with a blade in my hand."

"I did wonder."

"Come, and I'll show you." He led her across the hall with a purposeful stride that warned her that whatever they'd find would prove her wrong. He stopped beside the hearth, frowned down at the Yule log. "Perhaps you can guess what I was about to do?"

"Mercy!" Breena's eyes rounded as she stared at the Old Christmas Wife.

Only the heavy oaken log no longer resembled a crone.

The stump now looked like a big-bearded, bulbous-nosed man.

Breena clapped a hand to her breast, tearing her gaze from the monstrosity that was Duncreag's Yule log. She blinked in confusion at Grim.

"Whatever is that?" She looked at it again, horrified.

Worse, she now detected a slight familiarity about the reworked carving.

"Dear heavens!" She gripped Grim's arm, her gaze still on the ruined Yule log. "That's the face of Greer MacGregor, one of Archie's worst enemies."

"Indeed." Grim nudged the log with his booted toe. "I've been keeping an eye on the laird of late, same as you, it would seem. Archie crept in here earlier and tried to drag the stump out of the hall. When he couldn't, he knelt and drew his dirk, undoing the Yule log's magic by turning the crone's likeness into a man."

"One he can't abide." Breena was shocked.

Grim shrugged. "At least he hasn't entirely lost his sense of humor, or his skill at woodcarving. It's a relief to see his hand is steadier than it appears when he sits at the high table of an e'en, hardly able to cut his meat or lift an ale cup to his lips."

"You think he's faking his frailty?" The thought had never occurred to Breena.

"It's possible." Grim hooked his thumbs in his sword belt. "Sorrow and loneliness can do strange things to a man. Could be he's looking for sympathy and too proud to ask, or to show appreciation when it's given to him."

Breena felt her face warm, aware that she was guilty of coddling the old chieftain. She served at Duncreag as a housekeeper of sorts,

an unspoken seneschal. But Archie treated her more like a daughter.

She did care for him, and greatly.

“Is that why you didn’t confront him?” She looked at Grim, sure of it. “To keep from embarrassing him if he knew you’d seen what he’d done?”

“Aye, well...” Grim shrugged again, looking uncomfortable himself.

But then one corner of his mouth lifted in a way that did funny things to Breena’s belly.

She forgot all about the Yule log and even the strand of beribboned ivy at her belt.

She only saw the big rugged warrior standing so near to her that she could hardly breathe for how fast her heart was racing. Limned by the red glow of the hearth’s dying embers, Grim looked fiercer than ever. So magnificent that her knees weakened. Indeed, his raw, powerful masculinity seared her, heating her entire body as if the hearth fire still blazed and she’d leapt right into the flames.

He was that awe inspiring.

No bonnie lad, but a man.

He looked at her intently, as if he knew her thoughts, every wicked, impossible notion whirling through her mind.

Breena stepped back, dusted her skirts. “You were going to fix the carving, weren’t you?” It was all she could think to say. “You meant to turn it back into an old woman before anyone could guess what Archie had done.”

“That was one of my reasons, aye.” He raised a hand then, silencing her as he glanced toward the hall’s shadowed door arch.

Breena followed his gaze, alarm sweeping her when she heard what had drawn his attention: slow, shuffling footsteps and the telltale tap-tapping of a crummock, a tall, crook-headed Highland walking stick.

Archie was coming.

“Oh, no!” She glanced about, but it was too late to escape. “He’ll see us and know we’ve been watching him.”

“See us, he will, aye.” Grim didn’t sound concerned. “But he’ll no’ think we’re in here because of him.”

“Of course, he will.” Breena felt awful.

The last thing she wanted was to shame the old man.

“Dinnae look so stricken, lass.” Grim stepped closer and cupped her face in his hands. He leaned down, spoke against her ear. “He’ll

no' suspect a thing."

Breena wasn't so sure. "Why not?"

"Because"—Grim straightened, slid a telling glance upward at the ball of mistletoe above their heads—"I'm about to kiss you."



* * *

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“Sue-Ellen Welfonder brings legends and love to life.” – Fresh Fiction

USA Today bestselling author Sue-Ellen Welfonder won Romantic Times Best Historical Romance Award for her debut title, *Devil in a Kilt*. Many of her books have been RT Award nominees, and have received RT Top Picks and K.I.S.S. Hero Awards. She is thrilled to be a winner of InD'Tale's RONE Award. Her favorite reader compliment is that her stories transport them to medieval Scotland, the setting of most of her books. She is also known for her strong heroines, Alpha heroes, and weaving Highland magic and humor into her tales.

Sue-Ellen also writes as Allie Mackay, penning contemporary paranormals, mostly set in the Scottish Highlands.



* * *

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